



Melbourne, Australia; photo, Steve Rohrbach

The Parliament of the World's Religions 2009

KUSUMITA PEDERSEN

The Parliament of the World's Religions, held every five years, took place in Melbourne, Australia on December 3-9, 2009. For seven days participants thronged the brand new and dramatically modern Melbourne Convention Center on the east bank of Yarra River, which flows through the center of the city. At the beginning of the Australian summer, the weather is variable and Melbourne is said to have "four seasons in one day". In warm sun or cold rain, at all hours attendees in attire of many cultures could be seen strolling or hastening up and down the riverside walkway. The huge lobby of the Convention Center was alive with Chinese Buddhist drumming, an auspicious lion-dog deity from Bali called the World Peace Barong,

Kusumita P. Pedersen is Professor of Religious Studies at St. Francis College in New York, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions and Co-Chair of the Interfaith Center of New York.

dancers and chanters, groups of people in conversation, announcements of all kinds hung up or piled on tables, snack bars, and several information stations including the Council Hub. At the Hub, Trustees of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions were on duty to meet a steady stream of visitors and inquirers, sign people up for PeaceNext, the Council's new social networking site, talk about CPWR, and enjoy being together informally. Almost six thousand people from over two hundred religious traditions and subtraditions gathered from all over the world for what some said was "The best Parliament ever."

The Melbourne Parliament made visible the maturing of the global interreligious movement. Another way of saying this is that more and more people have now been involved in interfaith work for a longer and longer time, and a great many of them were in Melbourne. This was the fourth "new" or "modern" Parliament beginning with the 1993 centenary in Chicago, which gave a broad impetus to interfaith. In the intervening sixteen years grassroots interfaith activity has been rapidly increasing in many parts of the world. 9/11 and ensuing events made consciousness of the need for this work far more acute. Many Melbourne participants had attended several Parliaments, even all four, and in between they had been carrying forward their own programs. This time, as CPWR Chair the Reverend Dr. William Leshner describes it, "Perhaps even more than in previous Parliaments, there was a sense of 'reunion' in Melbourne where friends in the interreligious movement

eagerly reconnected, embraced and quickly fell into animated conversation." Whether veteran interfaith organizers or first-time participants, those at the Parliament had a solid foundation of knowledge and experience supporting them, and this confidence could be sensed.

MAKE A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Holding the Parliament in Australia gave an opportunity for Australian, Pacific and Southeast Asian participants to take part in greater numbers and to interact with those from other regions. The Parliament is convened on a movement model rather than with official representation and thus it is not a formal, deliberative meeting. It is, however, the world's largest and most inclusive regular interreligious gathering, bringing together in their individual capacities thousands of members of local religious communities and interfaith groups along with religious leaders, scholars, artists and experts. Says incoming CPWR Chair Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid, "The people who attended the Parliament were not just individuals but interconnected people. They are a part of existing networks of faith who are connected with partners in other faith communities struggling together to change the world." Not a "conference" in the usual sense, the Parliament is a week-long series of workshops, panels, lectures, dialogues, religious observances and meditations, cultural events, "Open Space" gatherings, exhibits, films and

plenaries – in Melbourne, almost seven hundred in all.

This Parliament showed the practical, focused engagement of the interreligious movement with critical issues. Its theme was “Make a World of Difference: Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth” and program sub-themes embraced the main theme’s different aspects: Healing

CLIMATE CHANGE

The issue of global warming loomed over the Parliament, which overlapped at its end with the United Nations Climate Change Conference beginning in Copenhagen. Key religious leaders addressed the climate issue in a major panel and every religious



Hindus; photo, Steve Rohrbach

the Earth with Care and Concern, Indigenous Peoples, Overcoming Poverty in an Unequal World, Securing Food and Water for All People, Building Peace in Pursuit of Justice, Creating Social Cohesion in Village and City, and Sharing Wisdom in the Search for Inner Peace. Much thought and effort had gone into this structure and its development, and it was generally recognized in Melbourne that the substance, rich variety and excellence of the overall program had attained a new level

tradition offered in-depth sessions on its approach to the environment. The first Convocation of Hindu Spiritual Leaders ever to be held at a Parliament focused largely on environmental ethics and culminated in the launch of the “Hindu Declaration on Climate Change”, drafted by a distinguished international committee chaired by Karan Singh and including *Interreligious Insight* Co-Editor Seshagiri Rao, Arvind Sharma of McGill University and the Editors of *Hinduism Today*. With three resounding “Aums” the Hindu gathering

affirmed the Declaration, which says in part, “Knowing that the Divine is present everywhere and in all things, Hindus strive to do no harm. We hold a deep reverence for life and an awareness that the great forces of nature – the earth, the water, the fire, air and space – as well as the various orders of life, including plants and trees, forests and animals, are bound to each other within life’s cosmic web.” In its conclusion the Declaration somberly adds, “Hindus recognize that it may be too late to avert drastic climate change. Thus, in the spirit of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, ‘the whole world is one family,’ Hindus encourage the world to be prepared to respond with compassion to such calamitous changes as population displacement, food and water shortage, catastrophic weather and rampant disease.”

Important sessions were also held on the food crisis, water, ending poverty, and human rights including religious freedom. A series of panels on conflict resolution took up specific case studies and also studied the contributions of women and Indigenous peoples to resolving conflict. Sessions were held on human trafficking, on reconciliation on places of extreme violence including Cambodia and East Timor, and on torture. There was a noticeable readiness to grapple with intractable and sensitive issues such as proselytization and homosexuality, indicating that interfaith conversation is no longer tentative or exploratory. There is a misconception frequently had by those not directly involved that interfaith work is mainly “dialogue” among academics and reli-

gious representatives. Theological conversations do have an invaluable role to play, since there is no question that religious beliefs and ideas do influence and even determine people’s actions in “the real world”. But the stereotype of interfaith as mainly theoretical and polite “talking” or just a formal exercise could be easily dispelled by one hour at the Melbourne Parliament. Presenters spoke from their own work in the field, as practitioners and activists who are deeply engaged precisely because of their religious values. They at times debated heatedly and did not avoid topics that were difficult and contentious.

In the field of “global ethics” there were panels on A Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World’s Religions and on the Earth Charter. Hans Küng, the main drafter of the Global Ethic endorsed at the 1993 centenary Parliament, was there to present a new statement, “Global Economic Ethic – Consequences for Global Businesses”, which builds on the 1993 declaration. Dr. Küng also took part with other authorities in discussions of the global economy. Women, the divine Feminine and gender equality emerged as a cluster of pressing questions; New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof called President Jimmy Carter’s televised address on women “magnificent”. A special effort had been made to create an array of programs that would counteract stereotypes of Islam. More than fifty sessions covered all aspects of Islam in global context: religion and spirituality, politics and social justice, and the relation of Islam

to other faiths. An international roster of distinguished Muslim speakers included Oxford scholar Tariq Ramadan, Imam Feisal Rauf, founder of the Cordoba Initiative, and Professor Sakena Yacoobi, President and Executive Director of the Afghan Institute of Learning.

WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

It is impossible to do justice to all of the urgent questions, profound insights, moving experiences and eloquence of the hundreds of Parliament presenters. But Sakena Yacoobi's address in the Opening Plenary can be singled out as an example of one of the most compelling, embodying the spirit of the Parliament. She riveted the audience with her harrowing account of the ordeal of the Afghan people beginning with the Soviet invasion, and told us how in spite of everything she asked, "What can I do to help?" In 1995 she founded the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) and began providing teacher training to Afghan women, education for boys and girls, and health education to women and children. After the Taliban closed girls' schools in the 1990s, the organization supported eighty underground home schools for three thousand girls in Afghanistan. Because of its track record, AIL "is trusted," Dr. Yacoobi said, and now "The women of Afghanistan are standing up" in spite of horrendous suffering. She stressed that in all that she and her co-workers have done, they have been inspired and strengthened by their religious faith. She and many others at the Parliament affirmed that the

transformative power of spirituality is not something different or apart from our concrete work for peace and justice.

A popular panel on "Our Interreligious Future" with speakers who head international organizations including Religions for Peace, the United Religions Initiative and CPWR, gave significant promise of future collaboration between interfaith organizations. In the academic sector, a program entitled "Preparing Religious Leaders for a Multi-Religious World", funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, brought to Melbourne over one hundred students and faculty members from fifteen theological schools in the U.S. Before the Parliament, all the students had had to prepare at their home institutions by studying religious diversity. They held regular consultations during the Parliament itself and were required to create courses drawing from their experiences after their return. One indication of interest by leaders in "secular" guiding institutions was the unannounced arrival of a three-member team from the U. S. State Department and the Obama administration's Office of Faith-based Initiatives, who came for the week to find out more about interfaith; another was the participation of several United Nations officials and a session on the proposed United Nations International Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace. A number of expert panels examined the relation of media and religion with energetic interchanges in packed rooms. The Parliament received daily press and television coverage in Australia and beyond.



Indigenous Musicians; photo, Steve Rohrbach

Another sign of the expansion of the interreligious movement was the Paul Carus Award given to Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa, known by its acronym, IFAPA. The Carus Award (now US \$100,000) is given in memory of Dr. Paul Carus, a renowned scholar and publisher in the fields of religion, philosophy and science. Dr. Carus was a key figure in the introduction of Buddhism to the West and a prominent organizer of the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. IFAPA was formed in 2002 and brings together representatives of African Traditional Religions, the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. It has focused on conflict resolution and rural development as it creates a continent-wide interreligious structure for Africa. At the International Plenary of the Parliament, the Reverend Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary

of the Lutheran World Federation and President and a co-founder of IFAPA, received the award together with four other IFAPA representatives: Dr. Faroug El Bushra Abdel Gadir, Secretary General of the Sudan Interreligious Council, the Reverend Robert Hounon, Secretary of the Vodun Hwendo Tradition in Benin, Prabhudas Pattni, General Secretary of the Hindu Council of Africa, and Mrs. Lucretia Warren of the Baha'i Community of Botswana. Dr. Noko said, "Let it be known that IFAPA envisions an Africa where the religious beliefs and traditions of every community are fully respected; where children and youth must be formed through positive information about each other's religion; where current educational textbooks ought to be revised to ensure that they do not contribute to religious intolerance and conflict."

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

An important reason that Melbourne was chosen as the venue of this Parliament was the wish of the Australian partners to prioritize the concerns of Indigenous peoples. To make the Indigenous presence a major dimension of the Parliament, CPWR formed an Indigenous Task Force which worked for over a year to recruit a core group of forty especially invited Indigenous participants from the Americas, Asia, Africa and Europe. These international leaders were joined by their Australian Aboriginal and Pacific counterparts. The Opening Plenary began with the haunting sound of the didgeridoo and the traditional “Welcome to Country” by Aboriginal Elder Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin, Senior Woman of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin alliance, who are the traditional owners of the land where Melbourne is located. In the Closing Plenary Uncle Bob Randall, Yankunytjatjara Elder and Traditional Owner of Uluru (Ayers Rock) spoke of the Aboriginal way as total reliance on Mother Earth and unconditional love for all beings. A large segment of the Parliament programming was set aside for workshops given by Indigenous participants who spoke on issues they had defined, including spiritual practices and prophecies, colonization and genocide, the “doctrine of discovery” and terra nullus, preservation of culture, relation to ancestral land and healing the earth, sacred sites and religious freedom, health, food security, Indigenous rights and the United Nations. A highly suc-

cessful one-day Assembly for Indigenous participants was held off site with participation of about eighty delegates. A report back from this meeting was given to the Parliament in a standing room-only special session on the last day and also in the Closing Plenary.

There was a strong call for organized, ongoing effort to integrate Indigenous peoples into the interreligious movement globally during the five years leading up to the next Parliament.

Among the Indigenous participants were members of the Indigenous or “pre-Christian” religions of Europe. While many are not aware that these traditions survive in spite of two millennia of persecution, a small number of people still practice them as their inherited traditions (many others, often referring to themselves as Pagans, reclaim and revive them). After the Parliament, Professor Jonas Trinkūnas, the Krivis or High Priest of Lithuania's Indigenous religion, wrote to the organizers, “On behalf of Lithuania's Indigenous religious community, I would like to thank you for your hard and creative work in organizing such a grand event as the Parliament of the World's Religions. Thank you for finding and inviting us – people of Lithuania's ancient indigenous religion – to take part in the Parliament's work in Melbourne...The Parliament of the World's Religions, in today's world, has a very important role. Religion provides stability and trust in life. We, people of indigenous religions, know this well. Thank you for finally paying attention to Europe's indigenous religions. Many of these religions are awakening from a

sleep that has lasted hundreds of years. The Parliament has created the possibility for Europeans and representatives of indigenous religions from other continents to meet. This process will yield good results in the future. The Parliament of the World's Religions will doubtless continue to act even more as the element that unites the nations of the world. May our Gods and Goddesses protect the Parliament of the World's Religions."



A Celebration; photo, Steve Rohrbach

BUILDING THE INTERNATIONAL INTERRELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

The Reverend Dirk Ficca, Executive Director of CPWR, recently mentioned a piece of graffiti that appeared on the Berlin Wall as it was about to be torn down twenty years ago. The writing said, "Many small people in many small places doing many small things can alter the face of the world." Reverend Ficca says, "For me the hope of the world, of this Parliament, is for these small people." It is the "small people" working at the local level who make up most of the interreligious movement. We can define a "movement" as an activity united by shared goals and methods which does not require centralized direction but spreads because of commonly understood needs and shared processes and methods to

meet those needs. In Melbourne there was a new self-consciousness of this movement, an awareness stronger than ever that thousands – or millions – of us are doing this work together and building an international interreligious community. No one knows just how many interfaith projects, groups, programs and organizations exist in the world today,

but the Melbourne Parliament began to make apparent the real need for this kind of information. One step in the interconnection of the movement and the growth of knowledge about it was the seventy-five Pre-Parliament Events held in cities across the world in the two years leading up to Melbourne. On future plans, incoming Chair Imam Mujahid says, "In his speech in the Closing Plenary, the Dalai Lama encouraged us to take more action. What the Parliament now envisions is to organize the activists who are connected with us throughout the world in both virtual and physical networks. The physical network is our Partner Cities initiative where people will develop interfaith relationships and set their preferred agendas for local action. The virtual network is our new social networking site, PeaceNext, which will allow virtual groups to be formed around the causes individuals or groups would like to rally people to.

This on-line activism can enhance the physical networks. With these two steps, we hope that the Parliament's impact will continue to multiply."

CELEBRATION AND HOPE

The first session each day of the Parliament (from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m.) was reserved for Observances and the contemplative dimension of our traditions. At that early morning hour, rooms were filled with groups plunged in meditation, in dialogue on spirituality, singing or conducting solemn ritual. Evening Plenaries were a time to celebrate and let ourselves be moved by the artistic expressions of many traditions as well by as outstanding speakers. Bill Leshner recalls, "I will remember watching a Buddhist monk in his saffron robes clapping and stomping his foot as a gospel choir performed a particularly lively number with a distinct, rhythmic beat." In interfaith life it is now well established that not only is the experiential dimension and sharing of our spiritual practices essential to fostering understanding between our communities, but also experiencing the sacred arts of music, dance, story-telling, painting and sculpture. The arts convey meaning fully while bypassing ideologies, reaching straight for the heart. For some, sacred arts are at the center of the interfaith journey. It should also be said that there is a real need for all of us to celebrate on a regular basis. Service, advocacy and activism cannot be sustained without some way of renewing our strength, and for most people who

belong to a religious tradition, inner contemplation and also beauty, ceremony and song are indispensable sources of inspiration and empowerment.

We celebrate to keep hope alive as we stay connected to our sacred Source. Hope is not the same thing as optimism. While the growth of the inter-religious movement is indeed a sign of hope, no one takes the achievement of a Parliament (or any other single event) to mean that the immense problems confronting the human community will be readily solved or that conflict between religions will soon fade away. We need to ask with realism what the impact is of interfaith work on the larger society and whether over time it is able to transform the identities of religious communities so that one does not view the other as a threat. There may be evidence that this transformation is occurring in some places, but all efforts must continue undiminished. There are hundreds of millions of adherents of different religions who ignore interfaith or are opposed to it. Clearly, reaching and convincing the indifferent and the resistant must be a future aim and this may take much time. Strengthening and expanding the existing movement is the first thing necessary in striving for this goal. Commitment must also be unflagging as we work on all of the particular issues according to our diverse callings. It is an immense task, but it is all of us together who will accomplish it, moving forward by countless steps: "Many small people in many small places doing many small things can alter the face of the world."