

Interreligious Insight

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A Mosaic of Impressions

some responses to the

Parliament of the World's Religions, Barcelona, 2004

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Through the 1990s, I have been inspired in my teaching and advocacy in education for a culture of peace by the ideas, principles and dialogues flowing out of the previous Parliaments. In particular, the declaration of the 1993 Chicago gathering, which powerfully presented the case for a Global Ethic, continues to be urgently relevant to the vision and mission of peace education. Values and principles underpinning conduct, relationships and structures of non-violence, local/global justice, human rights, intercultural respect and spiritual growth are core to the building of a peaceful world at all levels of life.

While the Parliament experience was for me inspiring, educational, and renewing, it was additionally enriching to be also at the pre-Parliament Montserrat Assembly. Amidst the deeply spiritual environment of the Montserrat peaks, the Assembly process facilitated the sharing of ideas, experiences, challenges and, above all, hope among smaller groups of representatives of diverse faiths and from many active communities, working away at the grassroots, often quietly, to build peace through interfaith dialogue.

It was especially inspiring to hear and learn from the multitude of simple and profound acts being already practised or pledged by communities and/or individuals in order try to resolve the four selected global crises: increasing access to clean water; eliminating international debt for developing countries; supporting refugees worldwide; and overcoming religiously motivated violence. The Montserrat Assembly affirmed, in my view, one key principle of interfaith dialogue, namely, that various faiths and spiritual traditions, while acknowledging and respecting differences, are able to find common ground in values and ethics. These hopefully will inspire all faith communities to engage in social actions to transform our planet from a culture of violence to a culture of peace.

While it was possible to attend only some of the over 500 sessions at the Parliament, I felt that the overall theme of Pathways to Peace; the Wisdom of Listening, and the Power of Commitment resonated well in the dialogues in which I participated. Experiences and stories of courageous struggles to transcend divisions, hatreds, injustice and wars, as well as conceptual and analytical perspectives and insights, were generally shared with a spirit of openness, humility and self-critical respect. The highly visible presence and valued contribution of the younger generation, both in the Assembly and the Parliament, was an inspiring and timely reminder that interfaith dialogue and peace-building need to be intra- and inter-generational. It was inspiring to hear the 2003 Nobel Laureate for Peace, Shirin Ebadi, challenge all cultures and faiths to uphold universal values and principles of human rights. She also helped to demystify the "clash of civilizations" ideology and unmasked self-centered interests which underpin decisions and policies of powerful states to militarise and to pursue options of war. Other plenaries which yielded deep insights included one by the respected interfaith theologian, Raimon Panikkar, who urged participants to see faith and religion as a dynamic and living process whereby we continually transform and renew beliefs towards living in harmony and all the other values promoted by the Parliament.

The plenary which for me was very powerful and empowering brought together three commentators. Karen Armstrong usefully cautioned against stereotyping “fundamentalism” as necessarily “extremist” and/or “violent” in tendency, and noted the importance of understanding the root causes of fears and alienation underpinning the fundamentalist reaction against globalization and modernization. Professor Kamarrazan from Malaysia also called for a bridge to be built between “mainstream” and “fundamentalist” worldviews, in part to reach out to youth who feel confused and who can be susceptible to extremist recruitment. The third speaker, Rabbi Michael Lerner, likewise urged participants to affirm the humanity of fundamentalists critical of modernization, while disagreeing with tactics of extremism and violence and proposing alternative non-violent responses grounded in a global spirituality. As he usefully emphasized, modernization and globalization (from above) reflects also an ideology of “fundamentalism” with its own uncritical faith in the “free market”, extreme individualism and consumerism, leading to structural violence.

A symposium, in which I contributed, focused on what I feel is sometimes an overlooked dimension in interfaith dialogue, namely interfaith education. As participants noted, the content and processes of interfaith education, as well as of intrafaith education, need transformation in order to empower and critically challenge faith-communities to read and re-read their beliefs and institutional practices in ways that build a culture of peace rather than a culture of violence, human rights violations, discrimination, intolerance and unsustainability. In this regard, I certainly view as a vital interfaith educational tool the component of the Parliament’s program highlighting the theme of engagement. Sessions on issues of social, economic and political engagement – such as fair trade, globalization, ecological sustainability, ethical banking, people-centered development, resolving the AIDS/HIV crisis, a non-violent peace force, human rights, conflict resolution and intercultural and interfaith reconciliation – help to remind participants that interfaith dialogue needs to lead not just to deeper understanding, but also to collaborative and courageous commitment to transform ourselves and our world.

Yet, as I departed from the Barcelona Parliament – infused with many creative ideas and inspired by hopeful success stories as well by courageous and patient struggles in the midst of great barriers and difficulties – I was left wondering if the Montserrat Assembly engagement process may not have been more fully integrated with the Parliament program. Are all communities and individuals committed to the cultivation and deepening of spirituality, faith and “inner peace”, while simultaneously engaged in what a holistic peace education refers to outer and social peace, which inevitably calls for both individual and structural transformation? As I look back on my first Parliament experience with hope, joy and gratitude for the enormous dedication and energies contributed by organizers and volunteers, I hope future Parliaments may highlight this issue of challenging all of us to link inner and world peace dialogically, of a spirituality that searches for deep inner blessings (in many forms) and also builds authentic compassion, justice, human rights and sustainability for all.

From: KUSUMITA P. PEDERSON

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Shortly after my return to New York from Barcelona I attended the annual conference of the North America Interfaith Network (NAIN). The first session I went to was on the Parliament of the World’s Religions and those who reported on it had all found their participation rewarding, even exhilarating. They spoke of the opportunity to build partnerships, acquire knowledge, meet old friends, make new ones, and be strengthened in their own work – all important aims of the event. It seemed clear to almost everyone that the groups and individuals who had met from all over the world are themselves “the Parliament”. Thus there was general acceptance of what had been an important premise in organizing this Parliament: that each participant was asked to make a personal commitment to work in his or her home setting towards solutions of any of the problems discussed in Barcelona. The affirmation of this basic principle is a significant achievement on which we can build in organizing future Parliaments and other interfaith programs on a movement model.

For many people, the daily Sikh langar, where thousands were fed each day, was “the heartbeat of the Parliament” and a form of “radical hospitality”. Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, Vice President of the National

Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, was quoted in *Newsday*, saying, “Every day they served a free lunch simply so people could experience what for them is sacred: that no one should go hungry. I watched people who don’t just pray about feeding everyone, but do it. I don’t think I’m ever going to be Sikh, but because of the Sikhs, I’ll be a better Jew.”

I will always remember Bhai Mohinder Singh standing on the stage during the plenary when the Sikh community was celebrated, saying with utter simplicity, “You have given us honor. You have given us dignity. You have loved us. We have no words to express our thanks”, and then being overwhelmed by emotion. Having heard my share of verbose speeches by religious leaders enticed by a microphone, I was profoundly impressed and moved by his complete unpretentiousness and tears of gratitude. He set an example for us all. Let us continue always to offer one another honor, dignity and love, and let us thank one another – as he did – with few words but many of our heart’s tears.

Something similar happened at the workshop, “Can We Pray Together?”, organized by Marcus and Mary Braybrooke. After the formal presentations had been made by the panelists, fifteen or twenty people came forward to share their personal stories about interfaith prayer. Not one person spoke overlong or attempted to dominate the discussion. Again, I was impressed by the sincerity and egalitarian spirit of true dialogue displayed by everyone taking part, all of whom clearly wanted very much to hear from others about their best practices and insights as well as to offer whatever they themselves had learned over the years. This workshop, like many at Barcelona, showed us a now prevailing and deep-rooted interest in the interfaith movement in actual practice, whether in methods of meditation and prayer, ritual, practical ways of organizing a local program, education or conflict resolution.

This focus on concrete practices explains not only why the Sikh langar proved to be so central, but why for many a highlight of the Barcelona Parliament was the Concert of Sacred Music held at Sagrada Familia Temple. Music and dance communicate across traditions, but fully and concretely. The role they play in interfaith work is bound to become more and more significant. It also has become clearer than ever that meditation and prayer, on the one hand, and activism, on the other, are not two separate – let alone opposed – realities. In all their varied expressions, contemplation and action nourish each other and both are indispensable. This was the feedback from programs and plenaries alike.

The addresses of Shirin Ebadi, Raimon Panikkar, Jane Goodall and Bishop Ochola stirred and enlightened us. We were also illumined and brought together on a level beyond speaking by the crying reed flute and ecstatic turning of the Mevlevi Dervishes, the haunting cello solos of Michael Fitzpatrick, and the intensely powerful silent invocation and esraj music of Sri Chinmoy, who offered the Opening Meditation without saying a single word. Can we pray together? We do not know yet. But we can be present to one another in song, in ceremony and in silence.

From: MARCUS BRAYBROOKE

*President, World Congress of Faiths and Patron of Interreligious Insight;
Consultant, Parliament of the World’s Religions.*

The symbolic importance of the Parliament of Religions held in Barcelona, where “Christian” Europe looks out across the Mediterranean Sea to Muslim North Africa, was considerable. Religious rivalry has reasserted itself in many places; it was, therefore, of great significance that members of so many religions could meet in friendship to think how they can work together for a better world. There was less religious self-advertisement than there had been at previous Parliaments and many sessions, which were well organised, had an emphasis on interfaith co-operation.

I felt the interfaith movement became more mature and deeply rooted. It was remarkable that at the session – the first I attended – on “Can We Pray Together?”, organised by the World Congress of Faiths, no-one spoke too long and every one, by sharing moving personal experiences, enriched the session.

There were participants from countries where interfaith work is still in its infancy. It was good to meet people from the Ukraine, for example, and Rwanda. At the Assembly, which preceded the Parliament there

were plenty of young people. At the Parliament, young people had their own programmes, which they may have preferred, but this left older participants feeling deprived of youth's energy and new ideas.

There were perhaps fewer "religious leaders" – whatever that dubious term means. Maybe more heads of faith-communities are now directly in touch with each other and no longer need interfaith organisations to get them together. The Parliament is essentially a people's event and anyone can come, provided they can find the money, and generous sponsorship and local hospitality meant finance was not too much of a barrier.

The Parliament did not pass resolutions. It was a Parliament in the original sense of an occasion when people speak together. As a result the Parliament did not capture many headlines, but then the founders of most religions relied on a small band of disciples to spread their message. Based on the maxim "be the change you hope to see", many people were challenged to commit themselves to simple and profound actions. Individuals whose attitudes are changed help to change others and the ripple effect of the Parliament cannot be easily assessed. Each participant will have his or her own story.

Yet the structures of world society also need to be changed. Interfaith organisations still need to work far more closely together to maximise their impact on a divided world, where many are hungry or afraid and the environment is in danger. How effectively do we build on the ever-growing number of international interfaith conferences?

I wondered if my simple and profound action should have been to resolve to attend no more such gatherings and to give the money to help provide clean water for those whose cup is empty.

We have by our doorway Gandhi's Talisman: "Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him." Unless it is, much as I enjoyed meeting again old friends and making many new ones, going to the Parliament will have been self-indulgent. I hope, however, it will energise me and others who were there to work for a world society in which, in the words of Charles Bonney, who was President of the 1893 Parliament, we recognise all people as brothers and sisters.

From: DAVID JOHNSTON

*Leading proponent in the US green building industry and president of What's Working, an international design and consulting firm, specializing in environmental construction technology.
Founder of the Passive Solar Industries Council in Washington, DC.*

January 1, 2000 was a remarkable day in World History. Just a few weeks past the Cape Town Parliament and the ominous date of the Y2K scare, CNN captured 24 hours of world peace. City by city, time zone by time zone, the world celebrated together welcoming in the new Millennium. No terrorist attacks, local warfare stopped, there were only a few arrests nationwide in the US for rowdy behavior! It was a day that 6+ billion people could be proud of and most importantly remember – the feeling of a planet at peace.

In my mind a precedent was set that is available to us all as we advance the 21st Century. The Barcelona Parliament was a testament to the potential of peace. With 7- 8000 representatives from across the globe gathered to further the prospects of peace, the ambience was one of hope and inspiration. Just the delight to the eye of so many world traditions in their respective garb was enough to bring tears to my eyes. We can dialogue meaningfully, honestly and vulnerably.

At the same time, over 100 wars are concurrently taking place, many in the name of religion. Granted it is not the intent of any religious doctrine to prescribe war, intefaddah, or social injustice, but the sale of weapons and munitions continue unabated. The investments by governments in weapons of mass destruction is unconscionable, and the current situation in the middle east continues to be a black hole for resources that could be used to provide sanitation, fresh water, education for women, vital health care services, micro economic development and the myriad other critical issues screaming for funds and commitment.

The distinctive difference between the 1999 Cape Town Parliament and the 2004 Barcelona Parliament was the focus of each. Cape Town was thrilling in its focus on how to bring the world's wisdom to bear on the critical issues facing the planet. There were tracks devoted to the issues of sustainability, AIDS, the role of women, and the engagement of the Guiding Institutions (politics, religion, business, NGOs and other civil society organizations). Personal commitments of "Gifts to the Planet" were a focus for action after the Parliament was over. I found this focus replaced by enormous redundancy in talking about dialogue among the world's religions. Indeed, the committed individuals who came to Barcelona were engaged in dialogue with each other and across religious boundaries. But, for me, dialogue is not enough. The Dalai Lama talks about "compassion in action". Rabbi Soetendorp from the Netherlands speaks of "prayer with legs".

I attended many of the sessions that involved non-dialogue issues and they were dreadfully under attended. One that was hosted by the World Bank, the UN Millennium Goals and the Earth Charter had maybe 60 people in the audience. Dialogue is a vital first step, but with all of the world's systems in dramatic decline and the number of people without access to clean water or sanitary conditions mushrooming, compassion in action is what is being called for. We, as the conscious, devoted and committed few are being inducted into service to the global community. How do we do it? Where do we start? Who are our allies? How do we collaborate on effective solutions to the global environmental conundrum? Those questions were not apparent in the structure of the presentations or in the sessions that I attended. I feel a great opportunity was lost in not creating a forum for critical issues to be addressed beyond the four identified by the Assembly in Montserrat. I hope those sessions were indeed "prayers with legs".

From: NAHID ANGHA

*Founder of the Sufi Women Organization;
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Executive editor of the journal Sufism: An Inquiry.*

Pace becomes necessary if we value the wealth of being more than we value the wealth of having.

No one knows when was the beginning of time but science tells us that our creation or at least our universe, as we know it, came into being as a result of a violent explosion. The universe began to unfold into galaxies, and our earth gradually came into being.

Since nothing in this universe vanishes into nothingness, and the memory of the universe is always kept alive and never dies, then, we, as one of the outcomes of that violent explosion, have necessarily inherited the violence of the beginning, and we pass it along from one generation to another.

Beneath the beautiful face of nature lies a ruthless fight for survival: every living cell desires for more, struggles for more, and dies fighting for more, or defending what it possesses. Then why should there be any need for peace when violence may protect our personal survival, and our possessions?

Peace becomes necessary if and only if we value the wealth of being more than we value the wealth of having. It is at this very point of recognition that the value of life is realized, that being will take a higher stage than the demand for possession, and that peace becomes a necessary tool to protect this invaluable gift of creation.

Teachers of humanity, throughout the ages, have taught us and reminded us that even though we have inherited the violent act of the beginning, yet, at the same time, we have also inherited the wisdom, the intelligence, the reverence, the compassion, beauty and order that saturate the creation. Following such teachings human beings, throughout ages, have taken steps to protect the beauty of creation by devoting themselves to find ways to become and remain peaceful to the earth and all her inhabitants. As we finally understand that it is not the governments that we should seek to change in order to promote peace but ourselves, so that we ourselves become a peace maker within our small community of mind and heart, for the sake of our family and society. A human being who honors humanity, in all its variation, will necessarily lead humanity towards peace.

During these many years of destruction “Pathways to Peace” was a suitable theme, an alerting reminder, for the 2004 Parliament of the World’s Religions conference, where a great number of outstanding leaders of faiths, peace activists, artists and scholars came together to promote peace so that the wealth of being may be honoured.

The conference began with the Assembly of faith leaders, from many lands and cultures, professions, and age groups, in order to address four major issues: to stop religiously motivated violence, to review the right to clean water, to begin the elimination of the external debt of developing countries, and to help refugees. Participants spent three days focussing discussing and addressing ways to overcome these global issues and continue their efforts to accomplish set goals. During these three days these issues became global issues to be addressed by many cultures, and the momentum continued to the Barcelona conference, attracting more dedicated people to carry on the goals and missions.

The Barcelona Parliament included many worthwhile lectures and symposia from “The Role of Religions in the New Paradigm of International Relations” to “Paths Towards Peace in Africa: a Contribution from the Perspective of Traditional African Religions”, from “Dimensions of Peace, Politics, and the Spirit” to “World Peace Begins From Within”. The whole was an illuminating and educational week, where we came across many of our international brothers and sisters who spoke the language of peace, honor, and compassion.

The beauty of the city, the vitality of the people, the devotion of the audience and participants, the effort and dedication of the organisers, all hand in hand, entwined me in the thought that peace might be possible after all, and all members of the human family might taste the sweetness of peace before this decade is over.

Congratulations to those who made this successful gathering a possibility, for one more time.