

Parliament of World's Religions

Melbourne, Dec.3-9, 2009

VEDANTA CENTRE OF
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ERRINGTON
NSW 2115
AUSTRALIA

A REPORT

BY SWAMI ATMESHANANDA

"If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."

With the above words, Swami Vivekananda concluded his series of lectures at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago on 27th September, 1893. The Parliament was held in connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago wherein science, philosophy, history, culture – in short, everything that is relevant for the development of human race was discussed during the deliberations which went on for sixteen days.

In 1991, some monks from the Ramakrishna Order thought it fit to organize an all-faith meeting in 1993 to commemorate the centenary of this historic event. They formed a committee to organize this event including therein prominent religious leaders of Chicago. However, they all opined that it was best to revive the spirit of the Parliament of Religions and thus the second Parliament of World's Religions was held in 1993 in Chicago. It was attended by thousands of delegates from all over the world and the response was overwhelming. It provided a common platform for the representatives of all faiths to interact with followers of other religions and understand the common basis of all religions. Delegates attending the Parliament felt that such august gatherings must be repeated to defeat the divisive forces in society. Accordingly, it was resolved that the Committee for the Parliament of World's Religions (CPWR) would select a City to host the Parliament once in five years and conduct the proceedings of the Parliament.

The tremendous response to participate in the Parliament of World's Religions (PWR) evinced interest from some countries and, subsequently, Cape Town in South Africa hosted the PWR in 1999 followed by Barcelona, Spain in 2004. In 2007, members of the CPWR visited Melbourne to explore the possibility of Australia hosting the PWR. The committee also visited Singapore and Delhi, other contenders to the event. Ultimately, the committee chose Melbourne as the venue for hosting the PWR in 2009. A local committee



Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre

with prominent members of various religions was formed and thus Melbourne prepared to welcome thousands of delegates from all over the world to host this important event from the 3rd to 9th December 2009. Its theme was: 'Make a world of difference:

hearing each other, healing the earth.' The venue chosen was most appropriate – the brand new Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre on the banks of the Yarra river.

Nearly 6000 delegates from 80 countries representing nearly 250 religious groups had registered to participate as delegates (of whom about 5500 attended) and there were around 1250 speakers and presenters. There were nearly 640 sessions during this week-long Convention, some of them unique in the subject matter and presentation. There were talks, group discussions, dialogues, Yoga, meditation and worship sessions, Art appreciation, dances, music and a variety of performances.

Inaugural Session

On 3rd December 2009, the inaugural ceremony began with Australian Indigenous Reception and a Shinto Blessing. Representatives of various faiths including Hinduism offered prayers and blessed the gathering. Auntie Joy Murphy Wandin, senior elder of the Wurundjeri people, traditional owners of the land on which Melbourne resides, welcomed the gathering. Prof. David De Kretser, the Governor of Victoria, Hon. Laurie Ferguson from the Australian Government, Cr. Jennifer Kanis from the City of Melbourne, Hon. James Merlino, Assisting Premier of Victoria from the Government



Dr. William Leshner , Chairman, PWR (above), Sand animation (below)



welcomed the gathering. Among others, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar of the Art of Living Foundation gave the keynote address and urged everyone to work for Peace. Dr. William Leshner, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Parliament of Religions welcomed everyone warmly and urged the delegates to interact with each other and share their beliefs, traditions, thoughts and forge a bond. The session concluded with colorful dances and music. A very attractive part of the programme was the sand animation art by Stephanos Eleftheriadis. He deftly drew the themes of the music, different symbols etc on a glass plate which was projected onto a large screen. The Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Orchestra and the Melbourne Choral Society provided wonderful music accompaniment as well as choir music to the whole programme.

Overview of daily activities and Schedules of Programme

Each day, from 8 a.m till 9 p.m. the participants had access to conduct religious observances, discussions on a variety of

topics and open space discussions followed by colourful and inspirational plenary session every night. To give a general idea:

8 a.m. to 9 a.m. was reserved for Religious observances from diverse religious and spiritual traditions which included Yoga, Meditation, Exercises, Worship, Prayer etc. For ex: ‘How a Jain starts a day – the Rituals’ attracted some genuine interest.

9.30 a.m. to 11 a.m. was meant for Intrareligious sessions when speakers from a single religious tradition explained their identities, teachings and discussed challenges faced by them. Religious leaders such as Dadi Janki, Dada Vaswani inspired the audiences.

11.30 a.m. to 1 p.m. was the time when there were Inter-religious sessions and speakers from two or more traditions engaged in discussions. Discussions like: ‘A Swami and a Rabbi’ attracted a lot of attention and interest.

After lunch, from 2.30 p.m. to 4.00 p.m. there were Engagement Sessions when panel discussions were held to consider the challenges facing each tradition and ways to deal with them.

4.30 p.m. to 6 p.m. was reserved for informal discussions about various topics

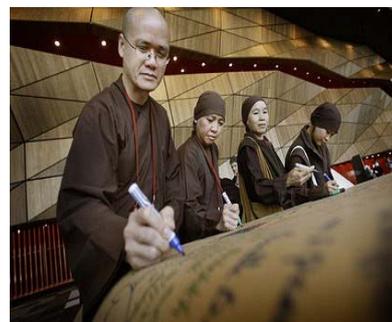
7.30 p.m. to 9 p.m. saw the delegates gathering in the main Plenary Hall to participate in Keynote presentations, prayers and colorful performances.

Discussion on Special Issues

The Parliament of Religions brought forth much needed understanding about several topics of national and international importance in the current times. Focus was particularly made about the understanding of indigenous religions and cultures of the world. The Australian indigenous



Members of the Zoroastrian faith with Melbourne Philharmonic Orchestra offering prayers at the Inaugural session



Delegates signing the petition to the Copenhagen summit

people, along with other indigenous elders gave their account of the struggles they undergo in practicing their religious

beliefs and narrated personal accounts of their experiences which indeed touched the hearts of many. Climate change took a prime place in discussions and as the PWR coincided with the Copenhagen conference for climate change, there were lots of responses to the issues arising out of the current crisis. When the Parliament concluded, all the delegates signed a petition to the world leaders urging them to respect Mother Nature and do their utmost in solving the global climate issues. The petition, along with an aerial photograph taken of all the delegates was sent to Copenhagen.

Poverty and its challenges in an affluent society was another interesting topic when Rev. Tim Costello of World vision, among others, discussed the issues which challenge the faith of believers. There were, in all, 22 sessions to discuss various aspects of this topic. I was reminded of Swami Vivekananda famous words “It is all right for those who have plenty of money and position to let the world roll on such, but I call him a traitor who, having been educated, nursed in luxury by the heart's blood of the downtrodden millions of toiling poor, never even takes a thought for them. Where, in what period of history your rich men, noblemen, your priests and potentates took any thought for the poor--the grinding of whose faces is the very life-blood of their power?”

On the 5th of December, in the Plenary Session held in the evening, Queen Rania, Queen of Jordan, addressed the gathering by video link. She began by saying 'As a Muslim I know all too well the pain of religious intolerance as our faith is abused by extremists from within and demonized from without....What we have in common is more powerful than our differences.' She concluded by saying: 'In your leadership I see hope for dignity and Peace.' Similarly, former President Jimmy Carter from the USA spoke on 'Religious Imperative for the Equality of Women and Girls'. Quoting from the Bible he said 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bound nor free, there is neither male nor female, we are all one in Jesus' (Paul's letter to the Galatians). He expressed concern that in Islam and Christianity women are not given equal rights for the practice and propagation of religion. He urged religious leaders to make efforts in their local communities to treat women as equal.

The PWR held symposia on a very important topic – Educating Religious Leaders for a Multi-Religious world. Altogether there were five sessions to discuss this topic. This was supported by another topic – Enhancing Religious Leadership for the Future. The discussions focused upon the need for multi-religious education for all religious leaders. Questions pertaining to Pastoral, Theological, Civic and Political issues were discussed in these forums. In the contemporary world there is a need for religious leaders to be equipped with knowledge and understanding of the different forces that are at play while preaching their own doctrines or dogmas. Apparently, the PWR laid great stress on these sessions as it recognizes that the positive attitude of religious leaders in representing their own faith as well as understanding other faiths in a pluralistic world is very important. This event was supported by the



Rabbi Michael Melchior, Swami Atmapriyananda, Dr. Antje Jackelen, Prof. Pal Ahluwalia and Ven. Eshin Nishimura

Henry Luce Foundation. Some important persons who took part in these discussions were the North American Theological School Students, Prof. Don Swearer from the Harvard Divinity school, Dr. Hajah Maria Ufah from Indonesia, Rabbi Michael Melchior from Denmark, Dr. Antje Jackelen, Bishop of Lund in the Lutheran Church of Sweden, Prof. Pal Ahluwalia from S. Australia, Swami Atmapriyananda, Vice Chancellor of Vivekananda University, India and Ven. Eshin Nishimura from Kyoto, Japan.

One of the new features of this Parliament was the inclusion of a Convocation of Hindu Spiritual Leaders on the 8th of December. From morning 8 a.m. up to 1 p.m. the PWR saw Swamis, Matajis and other venerated personalities providing a feast of insightful talks and guidance. Prominent among these were Dadi Janki of Brahma Kumaris, Dada J.P. Vaswani, Swami Parameshananda of Bharat Sevashram, Swami Amaranandaji of the Ramakrishna Mission, Amma Sri Karunamayi from Penusila, Andhra Pradesh, Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Paramarth Niketan, India, Sri Chinna Jeeyar Swamiji, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami from Hawaii, Paramhansa Prajnanananda Giri of Kriya Yoga, Swamini Mayatitananda Saraswati and others. The Chief Priest of the Indonesian Hindu Council offered the concluding Prayers on the

occasion. Chanting by members of ISKCON, sacred dances from Bali, Indonesia, Indian classical dance etc were other programmes in these sessions.

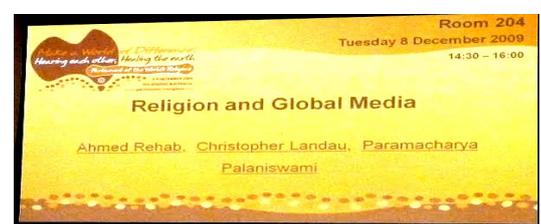


Convocation of Hindu Religious leaders

It was fascinating to see monks and nuns of the Chinese Han Transmission Esotericism Academy standing at the Foyer of the Convention Centre standing in rapt attention in front of a drum and meditating while standing for hours without any movement everyday! It was a lesson for everyone on self-control! This group also performed the Lion Dance and Sacred Drum Music.

Role of Media

We are living in an information age. Hence the role of the media is very important in the propagation of spiritual values. Altogether, 10 sessions were devoted to this topic. The challenge of Islamophobia and the Media, Digital revolution, Religion and Global Media, the Hazards of writing about Religion etc. were some of the topics that were discussed. In a particular session, the audience questioned the reporter of a famous media channel: When we are all gathered in this Parliament to discuss matters of vital importance to society, why are you silent about it in the media? But, if at this moment there is a fire in this building, the media will come out with lots of coverage to report the mishap. What is the reason for such negative reporting?'. The reply to this question was: 'The media does not view such programmes as 'worth reporting' as such events will not have much readership or viewership.' The biggest circulation Melbourne newspaper the 'Herald-Sun' did not cover the event at all. However, in fairness to media, I must say that some youngsters were covering the whole Parliament for ABC channel. Melbourne's 'The Age' newspaper also covered some aspects of the PWR.



Youth Participation

The PWR recognized the role of youth in the ongoing and future religious dialogues. A plenary session was exclusively dedicated to the youth on the 7th of December when the youth exhibited their talents in presenting music and arts programmes as well as thoughtful speeches on Religion and what it meant to the Youth. It was heartening to note that the Parliament was well represented by a number of youth and they actively participated in the proceedings. Some of the topics they discussed were 'Talking about My Generation', 'Sports as a Tool for Peace', 'Youth, Spiritual Development and Activism', 'Sustaining spiritual practices in a Changing World' etc. Apart from these sessions, there were evening sessions by the youth extending upto midnight when the youth engaged in Reggae and dub poetry – all on themes pertaining to peace and harmony.'



Multimedia Presentations

The Conference was, however, not all dry talk. Many a joyous moment was spent in appreciating the variety programmes in the form of dances, interactive dialogues, screening of films etc. Youngsters were in the forefront of these sessions. 'Divided we fall' by Valarie Kaur (a 20-year old college student) portrayed the reactions of various people after the September 11 attack in the USA; 'Not in God's Name', a documentary by Paula Force portrayed the search for tolerance after Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India was assassinated by her own bodyguards. 'Beyond Beliefs – Muslims and non-Muslims living in Australia' brought about the portrayal of the peaceful coexistence of the different religions. 'Compassion Rising' had its World Premiere at the PWR. It dealt with the connection between spirituality and the arts.

Swami Vivekananda was often remembered at the PWR. A documentary on Swami Vivekananda was screened on the 6th December followed by a talk on the life and teachings of the Swamiji by Swami Atmapriyananda. Swamiji's relevance to the modern age and his idea of unity of all faiths was greatly acknowledged in the many presentations and talks by the religious leaders.

Women's Issues

The voice of women was heard loudly and clearly by the Parliament. It was heartening to note that a large number of delegates to the conference were women. Debates about the headscarf, religious dress, Women's rights in Islam, role of Indigenous women in religion, Spirituality and Women's leadership in different religious perspectives, the recognition of the Sacred Feminine in religious traditions etc were discussed and debated in many forums.

Exhibition and Visual Arts

As an integral part of the Parliament activities, there was an Exhibition of Books, Religious articles and Visual presentations. Many of the faith based groups had put up their stalls and the delegates could visit them and interact with them all. Apart from that the monks of Gyuto University drew up an exquisite Sacred Sand Mandala over five days on the first level foyer of the Convention centre. An exhibition curated by the Arts and Culture committee of the PWR showcased the best of Australian contemporary Spiritual Art. The Ratna Nidhi Charitable Trust had sponsored colourful paintings of the Jain religious tradition which indeed caught the imagination of many.



Mandala art by Gyoto monks

Concluding Plenary

The Parliament concluded with a grand ceremony in which HH Dalai Lama, among others, spoke about Peace and Harmony. In his speech, the Dalai Lama spoke about Swami Vivekananda as the Swami responsible to bring about this revival of Inter-religious discourse. He reminisced about his visit to Kanyakumari in the southernmost tip of India and the inspiration that he derived from there. He urged everyone to draw inspiration from the Swami's Spirit and move forward to making the world a better place to live. One of the striking points in his speech was his exhortation to all religious leaders to engage even non-believers in their efforts to bring harmony. The session concluded with the election of a new Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Parliament of the World's Religions, Abdul Malik Mujahid. Imam Mujahid is an Imam in Chicago and the creator of the multimedia Islamic Resources organisation 'Sound Vision.' The next Parliament of Religions will be held in 2014. The venue is yet to be decided.

The Sikh religion was represented by a large number of people who presented various cultural programmes and added to the colourful variety of the Parliament. The Parliament has struck a right note in bringing about harmony and peace, at least to those who participated in the sessions. If those who were influenced by these interactions can carry home the message of peace and harmony there is no doubt that the world will be a safer place to live. But, ultimately the onus rests with individuals.