

Preparing for the Parliament of World Religions

By Marcus Braybrooke

Swamis, imams, rabbis, priests and gurus and their followers across the world are preparing for a pilgrimage to Australia for the fifth Parliament of World Religions, meeting in Melbourne from December 3-9.

The first Parliament, often seen as the birth of the Interfaith movement, met in Chicago in 1893. It was hundred years later before the next Parliament, also in Chicago. Much of the twentieth century was shaped by Secularism, Communism and Fascism – all hostile to religions, which themselves were still competitive rather than co-operative. Even so, the importance of understanding between members of the world religions was slowly being recognised, thanks to the International Association of Religious Freedom and the World Congress of Faiths, founded in 1936 by the explorer and mystic Francis Younghusband, and the growing academic study of world religions.

The 1966 Second Vatican Council decree *Nostra Aetate* encouraged Christians to appreciate and dialogue with adherents of other religions. Some Christians and Buddhists worked together for peace in Vietnam and a wider interfaith coalition – now known as Religions for Peace – was created to oppose nuclear weapons.

By 1993, when the centenary of the first Parliament of Religions was celebrated at events in UK, India, Japan, as well as Chicago, Communism had collapsed. The 1993 Parliament emphasised the moral values which religions share. *Toward a Global Ethic* called on believers to commit to

non-violence, a just economic order, tolerance and truthfulness and gender equality.

At the next Parliament in 1999, members of ‘The Guiding Institutions’ of civil society were, with limited success, encouraged to join the dialogue. More important, meeting in the new multi-racial and multi-religious South Africa, the Parliament showed religions’ usefulness in strengthening social cohesion.

Following the 9/11 attack, the emphasis of the 2004 Parliament was on showing that in no religion’s authentic teaching, is there justification for killing innocent people. Meeting in Barcelona, where from Europe one can see the coast of Africa, the need for a dialogue of civilizations was obvious. Four key issues were highlighted – access to clean water, the plight of refugees, cancellation of poor nation’s debt and reducing religiously motivated violence.

Meeting at the same time as the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference and with the active participation of many Aboriginals, the danger to the environment will be high on the agenda of this year’s Parliament. The overall theme is ‘Make a World of Difference: Hearing each other, healing the earth.’ The focus will be on the environment, peace, overcoming poverty, and strengthening global interconnectedness. Some may ask whether travelling from Europe to Australia is good for the climate, but the distance for Australians to Copenhagen is the same and participants are encouraged to offset their carbon footprint.

The Parliament is not a legislative body that passes resolutions – but a Parliament, in the original sense, of an occasion where people talk to each

other. It is not primarily a meeting of ‘religious leaders.’ Each participant has to decide how he or she will make a ‘world of difference,’ rather than telling other people what they should do. The Parliament is open to anyone, including members of new religious movements, who can afford to get there – and some financial help is available, especially for young people.

With over 8,000 participants, the Parliament’s programme will be very varied and reflect the different dimensions of interfaith activity today. Political leaders increasingly support interfaith because they hope that it can contribute to social cohesion and counteract extremists’ justification of violence by reference to religion. The importance of religion in shaping the community with which a person identifies and therefore in shaping a person’s sense of identity is easily underestimated especially by those who live in an increasingly secularised world. As a result, when conflict arises, although its causes are political or economic, because antagonists belong to different religions, that difference, and long remembered injustices, fuel the bitterness and are used to vilify the enemy. In the popular mind, therefore, and maybe the media, the conflict is then spoken of as a religious one or even a ‘holy war.’

In the long run education, at every level, is the key to improving interfaith relations. This still much often ignorance about other religions ensure that some study of world religions is included in the curriculum. People need also to learn about the artistic and musical heritage of other faiths.

The fruits of interfaith work, however, cannot be delivered without major theological rethinking in all religions. Over literal quotation of scriptures, which ignores centuries of scholarly interpretation needs to be

challenged. The justification of violence made in the past by some religious traditions should be repudiated. People of faith need to affirm that there is One Divine Reality, even if understood differently in different traditions. For example, the words ‘Allah’ and ‘God’ both speak of the Almighty. More than three hundred years ago, the Sikh Guru Gobind Singh, insisted that ‘There is not One God for Hindus and another for Muslims.’¹ Increasingly, religious difference is valued and people of faith are glad to learn and share with each other. More often this results not from theological argument but by the friendships that grow from meetings such as the Parliament of Religions. New friendships can remove past misunderstandings.

Often it is more fruitful to concentrate on issues that are of common concern. Practical issues of poverty and climate change will claim the attention of others at the Parliament. People of faith are increasingly acting together to relieve human need and have been warning of the dangers of the moral vacuum at the heart of the New Economy. They are at the forefront of efforts to protect the environment. Religious NGOs have taken the lead in calling for a ban on cluster bombs. People of faith should speak for the poor, the marginalized and those who have no voice. The most difficult area is working together for peace. At the height of conflict, religious leaders can do little except call for restraint, but faiths can help to prevent hatred and have a major role in peace-building after violence by emphasizing the importance of reconciliation.

The inspiration for practical service for people of faith comes from their spiritual life. So, at the Parliament, each day will begin with religious

¹ Mary Pat Fisher, *Anthology*, p. 307

observances, where participants can join with members of their own religion from around the world or experience another spiritual practice.

Only a few people can attend the Parliament but the event raises the profile of the wide range of interfaith activity across the world at local, national and international levels. UNESCO has taken important initiatives and are arranging a youth workshop at the Melbourne Parliament. The Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations, with UN backing, met in Turkey in April 2009. In 2008 the UN Population Fund arranged a Forum with Faith-Based Organizations for Population and Development. The possibility of a UN Decade for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue is under discussion.

Together all this activity is creating a global concern for peace, for the poor, for the environment. Only the future will judge whether all these meetings result in the urgent practical action, which is necessary. In Gandhi's words, 'Will it be of any use to the poorest and weakest' members of our world community?

Revd Dr Marcus Braybrooke

Marcus Braybrooke, a retired Anglican parish priest living near Oxford in England, has been involved in interfaith work for over forty years. After studying in India, he joined the World Congress of Faiths in 1964 and is now President. He is also a Co-Founder of the Three Faiths Forum and a Peace Councillor. He helped to establish the International Interfaith Centre at Oxford, of which he is now a Patron. He has travelled widely to take part in interfaith activities, including programmes arranged by World Thanksgiving. He was awarded a Lambeth Doctorate by the Archbishop of Canterbury for his contribution to interfaith work world-wide.

He is author of over forty books on world religions and Christianity, has edited several anthologies of prayers and meditations, *including 1,000*

World Prayers and Life Lines. His ***Beacons of the Light: 100 Holy People who have shaped the history of humanity*** is due to be published next year by John Hunt. www.o-books.net.

Some of the material used in this article is taken from *A Heart for the World: the Interfaith Alternative* published by John Hunt. www.o-books.net.