Voices from the Parliament
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Religious harmony remains a human puzzlement, but many who attended Chicago's historic Parliament of the World's Religions offered insights to help us put the disjunct pieces together.

If this 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, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character...Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. Swami Vivekananda, 1893 Parliament

Spirituality is not merely tolerance. It is not

even acceptance. It is the feeling of a universal oneness. In our spiritual life, we look upon the Divine not only in terms of our own God, but in terms of everybody else's God. Our spiritual life firmly and securely establishes the basis of unity in diversity. Spirituality is not hospitality to the other's faith in God. It is the absolute recognition of the other's faith in God as one's own.

Sri Chinmoy, Jamaica, NY

Before I arrived, it was with great joy that I saw that the program provided for regular morning meditation. It was with great sorrow that I discovered that each style tends to exclude or alienate those of other persuasions. Meditation or prayer in silence provides a space in which many can share and is a working symbol of

interfaith dialogue. Annie Moss, US

The Monday morning shouting matches were exactly what we needed to challenge our repeated assertions that we are the enlightened and loving elite. We are part of the problem. Love is neither easy nor cheap. Unity is not simplistic conformity.

George Dole, Sharon, MA

For many of us, coming to this Parliament is nothing less than a pilgrimage-a spiritual homecoming. It is always the case, however, that after mountaintop peak experiences, we are called to descend the mountains to encounter once again the face of human need.

David Johns, Canton, OH

The Global Ethic is far too imperative, too absolute, too Western, without sensitivity to other faiths. I won't sign it. It's already too political. The parliament itself, however, has been a wonderful surprise, existential proof of religious pluralism. All the religions are here, including the weird and odd, not just the four traditional faiths. That shows the spirit of pluralism is alive, the thrust and force of faiths with which we may not agree but we must acknowledge. Prof. Raimon Panikkar, Spain

The plenary session was unbalanced-its focus was Western and had a distinct aura of corporate America. There was no input from other religious perspectives. If anything, the emphasis was a rather positivistic approach. Anonymous

We are not so much trying to change history as we are trying to be an authentic voice within a changing history. We have tried to follow the beacon of hope that persons who have so vigorously disagreed and have been hurt by each other in the past might come together and find some basis for new beginnings and hope and harmony for the future.

David Ramage, IL, Parliament chair

My opinion is that the Parliament fulfilled its historic promise. I applaud the triumph that I strongly feel it was. The scale made it a truly people's event, open to all. If you are a church of one, you were allowed to come. I enjoyed the weirdness of it. I mean, it was really weird. There were just all kinds of people here. There was an immense psychic energy because of the openness of the event. It was like a Hyde Park of religions. There were so many charismatic leaders there. I have really never experienced anything like it. That was very important to see and to experience. Dr. Kusumita Pedersen, NY

May Vivekananda's great example and thrilling words be an inspiration to all people who wish to make themselves instruments of service, of helpfulness to others. There can be no life higher than that...There are many effective, equally valid religions. They are, therefore, to be equally reverenced, equally recognized and equally loved and cherished-not merely tolerated.

H.H. Swami Chidananda, Rishikesh, India

The events went well. One measure of success was the nearly universal pleasure that people who attended expressed about the Parliament. There were good feelings in the air. There was a lot of energy and people came from all over the world, all faiths. The Parliament will become an icon, a metaphor, for the possibilities for understanding and collaboration.

Daniel Gomez-Ibanez

Religion leads us to know we are the all powerful God. God is in us all. God is like space. Space is everywhere. Suppose we build a house. Space exists before the house, and after the house is demolished space is unchanged. God is like that. Everywhere and unchanged. God is all pervasive, and the light of consciousness within us. Heaven and hell are created by the mind. Rising up in love is religion.

Holy Mother Amritanandamayi Ma

I know some people thought that religion was a hangover of some bygone age and that as soon as people became more economically prosperous, they would forget all about it. That is a entirely false reading of the situation. In our own lifetime, it has become clear that the religious impulse is imbedded deep within the structure of the human psyche. In our country, when a village becomes prosperous, the first thing it wants is a place of worship-a temple, a mosque, a gurudwara, depending on the complexion of the community. Dr. Karan Singh, New Delhi

Today is a new beginning for religion. Humanity turned to science for the answers. Now it's turning back to religion. We all have to do better than we have ever done before. We all are really going to have to try. We all have to help. Each one needs to help and each one needs a spiritual preceptor. Choose one and seek the Self within. You know, we have all come a long way and it wasn't easy for everyone to sign the global ethic. But it was signed. There are still a few problems, and they are going to be solved. We are going to head into a beautiful future together, all of us. Let's all chant the mantram Aum. Aum. Aum. Aum.

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, HI

Speeches, nice words, much easy, but the implementation is much more difficult. In order to get some results, action is necessary. I think, I believe, I am quite sure, if all religions come together, work together and put forward common effort for the betterment of humanity, I think we can

do something!

H.H. the Dalai Lama, Tibet

The Sanatana Dharma can benefit all creatures, holding the ethical teachings of other faiths like the ocean holds waters. In spite of disagreements, tensions and

personal preferences, people here were attempting to work together. This is an important practice, one we have little experience in performing.

Lore Bazemore, Kneeland, CA

I saw as never before that spiritual resurgence is the crying need of our times, and alone can strengthen individual and global ethics. However, there should be more clear action programs evolved to follow up.

Dr. N.P. Jain, Indore, India

It was all too disorganized and underfinanced. There was too much talking, junk papers and lack of quality control and little real religious harmony achieved. Running from room to room, dealing with crowds in small rooms and a handful of people in large ones, confusions and changed times, bad acoustics for the elderly, like myself-all led to no real impact. Meditation should be given more importance.

Mrutyunjaya Rao, Seattle, WA

I am extremely happy about this noble idea. We have to make a beautiful, common platform for all religions. This parliament did a wonderful job.

H.H. Acharya Sushil Kumar, India

The assembly committee guiding the presidents was far too controlling of the process. Though lofty, the declaration is too timid. It has no real substance, no provision for recourse to action, so it's impotent. Without some taskforce, structure or reconciliation center where a body can meet to resolve differences, it's all talk instead of transformation of consciousness.

Singh Khalsa Gurutej, CA

The single most important issue brought up was the similarity of beliefs amongst all the religions, that there is a one Supreme Being, maybe called by any name, present among all living and non-living particles of the universe. As such, human beings are related to each other and should live like a family.

Dr. Prem Sahai, Webster City, IA

We have here an excess of good things. To take one we had to skip a hundred. Eastern spirituality has influenced this entire parliament, and beyond it the world. That's quite obvious and cannot be denied. This is the achievement of the last 100 years. To not lose momentum we must meet more often and address one question at a time in a more vigorous way. Lastly, something should be done to keep a better demographic balance. For example, there are 850 million Hindus in the world who had equal representation to very small groups that aggressively brought lots of people to Chicago. Prof. K.L. Seshagiri Rao, Monroeville, PA

I noted that people tended to stay with their own group in the breakout sessions. Please, if it is repeated, include lots of group activities that force (yes, force) us to dialogue-we need to get to know each other! Christians tended to associate with Christians and Hindus with Hindus, etc. Many sessions I attended were Sikh and I was the only one of two non-Sikh's there.

Jeremy Johnson, NY

Too many people are not functioning from real depth in their own religion sufficiently to see the similarities in others. Still, there was important sharing and communications here that can change old views and misconceptions about religions, and the saints that came from all the religions brought to life the various teachings. I have a clearer vision now of my role in this unfoldment process.

Scott Krshna Barnett, Omaha, NE

Love is the basis of life. Without love, the body is but bone and flesh. If life has a purpose, it is to realize oneness with God in love. Saivism equates Siva with love. It is the ahimsa of Jainism and the karuna or compassion of Buddhism. Love, in its broader sense, means living in harmony with the universe.

H.H. Bala Siva Yogeendra, Hyderabhad,

Some are here to advance their own religion or community, others to prove their separate identity, but many are keen to understand the truest spirit of religion. Every effort is good, provided it is sincere.

Jitendra Vir Gupta, Chandigarth, India

Rarely have I seen this kind of candor and sincerity spoken of, and that gives hope of resolutions. Dr. L.M. Singhvi, London, UK

A truly uplifting spiritual vibration permeated the lectures, major presentations, the private Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, informal hallway meetings and especially the closing event in a nearby park. We could tell that this Parliament was being divinely guided from within by God, Gods and deva helpers as a milestone achievement that would have long-lasting effects.

Yogi Rishinatha, Kapaa, HI

I'm here to familiarize myself with the plethora of religions as well as to join with the representatives of their nations in devising remedies or solutions to the numerous problems we face today.

Claudine Schneider, former member of US Congress

To our global mind we must add a global heart, even more a global soul. We must love each other, not hurt each other. For each of you is a miracle, and how can I hurt a miracle?

Dr. Robert Miller, VA

This Parliament has demonstrated that all people in the universe have needs. One group, people, culture or religion does not have to take from another to have their needs met when everyone gives.

Rev. Laurel Fuller, Sindyville, MO

There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions. There are currently forty wars around the world and religious

beliefs are central to most of them. Religions can create and shorten wars. Religion can change the heart of the people.

Dr. Hans Kung, Switzerland

The central issue of both Parliaments is the same-namely, how do various religious traditions understand one another? But unlike 1893, that is no longer an exotic issue of people who are interested in international geopolitical affairs. It is now a practical main-

street issue for much of America, particularly urban America.

Prof. Diana Eck, Harvard

I stood behind the podium, looking at thousands of people before me at the Parliament. It was my turn to deliver my presentation before the plenary session. I pranamed to my Lord Shiva and then to those before me, tears reaching my eyes from my heart when I saw the different religions of the world gathered before me. I began speaking about the wings of a butterfly and how one needs to be free of ego to fly upon the wings of a butterfly. I loved the Parliament in that moment and all it represented-the interfaith unity, the oneness. I knew then that this was the work of the Mother. But the special assembly within the Parliament with its 250 spiritual leaders was too short. Nine hours was not enough for this important gathering.

Ma Jaya Bhagavati, FL

Separate from yourself that which separates

you from your fellow man. Politics is the space between us; truth is the space where we are one.

Lex Hixon, USA

How wonderful to hear such prominent saints and scholars of the world. My wife, Ranjan, and I attended so many events and not once did we encounter attitudes which would insult our faith. I wish that some groups had not put such stress on their own growth and new members and also that the Shankaracharyas of India had been represented.

Shankerprasad S. Bhatt, IL

We have gathered here to raise our voices in unison, above the cacophony. We

have come to see together the oneness that we all share. We have come together to create a vision that will propel us towards a new dawn. It is indeed our turn and our responsibility. His Holiness Swami Chinmayananda before his final samadhi had agreed to become a President of the Hindu faith and wrote to us: "All presidents must not only learn to hold hands together and strive to improve, if possible, the older generation, but must hammer out their values of life in the growing youth of the world. There should be no sense of difference between Christian and Islamic, Buddhist or Jain-what we are serving is the youth of the world."

Dr. Krishna P. Reddy, Parliament trustee, IL

Resource Available: Readers seeking deeper background on the Parliament and the growing cooperation among religious traditions in ethical and practical matters can acquire 'the 240-page "A SourceBook for the Community of Religions" by sending US$17 to Joel Beversluis, 1039 Calvin SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49506.