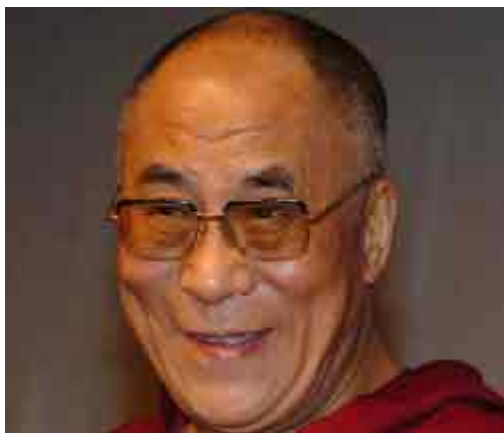


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Parliament of World Religious opens in Australia

by Edmund Chia



Dalai Lama

Melbourne, Australia

One of the world's largest inter-faith festivals has opened in Australia. Up to 8,000 people are expected at the Parliament of the World's Religions - among them is the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

During the gathering, which opened Dec. 3 in Melbourne, delegates will discuss issues such as climate change, indigenous rights and the West's relationship with Islam.

Native American leaders, rabbis from Israel and Buddhist monks from Vietnam will join Muslim scholars, Hindu philosophers and representatives of the various Christian denominations at the event. The six-day parliament convenes every five years

On behalf of the spiritual ancestors and the traditional owners of Melbourne, I invite you to Melbourne in 2009, for the Parliament of the World's Religions to share in the traditions,

culture and spirit of Australia. It is a traditional custom of Australian Aboriginal communities to give permission to people who wish to enter the country.

These words of welcome were from Professor Joy Murphy Wandin AO, Senior Woman of the Wurundjeri People. Prominently displayed on the homepage of the 2009 Parliament, which opened Dec. 3 and runs through Dec. 9, captures the Parliament's theme, which is Make a World of Difference: Hearing each other, Healing the earth.

Among issues to be explored are Earth Care, Reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples, the Search for Inner Peace, and the Pursuit of Justice. This is certainly a great leap forward from the first Parliament, held in 1893 in Chicago, where the Indigenous Peoples were not even represented. The centenary commemoration of that event in 1993 was no better in that they were represented not by one of their own but by an anthropologist! This comes as no surprise as the 1893 Parliament was held in conjunction with the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the "New World," a conquest which "successfully" led to the near destruction of the indigenous tribes of the Americas.

Thus, when the Parliament was launched many saw it as a sign of the Euro-Americans come of age and of fully embracing the ideals of liberalism and democracy. It was touted as the first ever such gathering in the world for bringing people together for respectful dialogue. The Muslim delegates quickly likened it to Akbar the Great's attempt in the 16th century to forge a universal religion for the Moghul Empire and the Buddhists pointed to similarities with Emperor Asoka's Patliputra pan-Buddhist conference in the third century BCE.

For some in the Western world, however, the Parliament was seen as an opportunity for people of the world's religions to address the problems of faith and recognize that there is but only one true religion. Secretly, of course, they were hoping that the Easterners would "see the light" and acknowledge the superiority of the Christian faith and the universality of the lordship of Jesus as savior of the world.

But they were in for a big surprise as the Asian delegates to the Parliament had come precisely to check the missionary agenda of the churches and counter western aggression and hegemony by asserting the integrity of their own religious traditions and cultures. The "superstar" at the 1893 Parliament was an obscure Bengali ascetic, Swami Vivekananda. "I am proud," Vivekananda began his address, "to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true."

In a concluding session he said: "But if anyone here hopes that this (religious) unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, 'Brother, yours is an impossible hope.' Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid." For these assertions Vivekananda received rounds of standing ovation and became a favorite of the press, in part also because of his exotic ochre robe and Rajasthani-style turban. Credited for introducing Eastern thought to the West, he then went on to establish Ramakrishna Missions and Vedanta Societies in North America and Europe.

It is no wonder that such events which bring peoples of different religions together are such a threat to the establishment. Protesters view them as syncretistic and therefore relativizing their own. How on earth, they wonder, can Christians even think of sharing the same platform with these Hindus and Baha'is and Cao Dais, or the Shintos, Shamans, Pagans, and Wiccans? Some postulate the impending Second Coming of Christ as was it not prophesied that the Antichrist would establish a near utopic period and a unified system (read: one-world government, one-world economy, and one-world religion) before the Book of Daniel's seven-year tribulation is realized?

In this context it is to the credit of Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore to explicitly express support for the 1893 Parliament and acknowledge that it "cannot but result in good to our common country." The bishops then approved the participation of the Catholic Church and appointed Bishop John Keane, the then rector of the Catholic University of America, to ensure adequate Catholic participation. Keane in fact wrote that "it is only by the friendly and brotherly comparison of convictions that reasonable men can ever come to an agreement about the all-important truths which are the foundations of religion, and that an end can be put to the religious divisions and antagonisms which are a grief to our Father in Heaven."

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Cardinal George Pell of Sydney continues the tradition of support and has this to say about the 2009 Parliament: "Major differences exist between religions, within religions, and in the contributions they make to culture and society. In a democracy, believers and non-believers must be free to talk about these differences, to criticize each others' beliefs (what Catholics used to call apologetics), and to evangelize, (or propagandize) while always respecting the freedom of the individual."

It is in this spirit of mission and dialogue that a group of more than one hundred professors and students from 15 seminaries in the United States have journeyed to Melbourne for the Parliament. As the only Catholic institution selected to participate, the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago is represented by a dozen students who are working towards graduate degrees in Interreligious Dialogue. Taking up Professor Joy Murphy Wandin AO's invitation we hope to be mindful that as we walk the streets of Melbourne we remember that we are in fact treading on the Aboriginal communities' holy grounds.

Edmund Chia is theologian originally from Malaysia and teaching at the Catholic Theological Union . He served many years as Interreligious Dialogue secretary for the Asian Bishops' Conferences.

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