

Forcing Change



“Things Change. Fast.”

A Report on the Parliament of the World's Religions

By Carl Teichrib

Thousands of exuberant voices united in song, the melodious vibrations flowing through the cavernous space of the main plenary hall. “Remember who you are; Goddess, Mother, Shakti of this Earth,” sang esteemed Hindu author, Vandana Shiva. The audience intoned back; “Goddess, Mother, Shakti of this Earth.”

It was going to be an interesting morning.



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Carl Teichrib, Editor

Note: All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the author's personal notes, the Parliament agenda book, and other materials gleaned from the event.

“What if the world were a place where it was effortless to recognize our common humanity, our shared virtues and concerns, and our collective devotion to the Earth?” asked Rabbi Amy Eilberg. “What if the whole world, all seven billion of us, were like this?”

Ojibwe “Grandmother” Mary Lyons told the multitude; “When you breath in, you breath in a breath of Mother Earth. And when you exhale, those are your ancestors.”

New York Times best-selling author on spirituality, Marianne Williamson, wowed the crowd with her charisma; “Every woman here who is a healer is a priestess. Every woman here who is a teacher or an educator is a priestess.” Her call to *sacred femininity* energized the great crowd, bringing them to their feet again and again during Williamson’s eight-minute speech.

“A Divine Goddess is not just beautiful,” Marianne exhorted, “she’s fierce. And when you mess with her babies... and you mess with her earth, she’s had enough of that sh*t. And we’re here on her behalf... you know what to do, go do it.”

The response to Marianne wasn’t a standing ovation. *It was more.* Women wept, danced, raised their hands, shouted and whistled and clapped. Someone yelled out, “Marianne for President!” Drums pounded in affirmation. I have no doubt that some of the attending men poured out their adoration too, as the Plenary was open to all, but where I was sitting, the male gender was largely absent.

Following Marianne, Dr. Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary, invited us to be “political actors” and to rethink the world. More cheers rose from the massive audience.



The processional during the Opening Ceremonies.

“We are strong,” bridged the moderator, building on the emotion of the morning. “We are woman. Make no mistake of it – we are strong.”

The Women’s Plenary, titled *Faith in Women*, was held on the morning of October 16, and was a rousing invocation to the goddess power within. As a plenary, however, it was not a stand-alone event. The day before was the Inaugural Woman’s Assembly, and I had attended this too. During this Assembly I listened as lecturers waxed on about the “Divine Mother within us,” how we are moving past the age of the individual and into the collective, and that we are entering a “new chapter in evolution” as we move into the All.

“We are one with all life,” explained an Assembly speaker. “We are one with all people. We are one with the one.” The emotionally charged crowd responded back; “We are one with all life... We are one with the one.”

Ancient goddess spirits were called to bless our gathering.

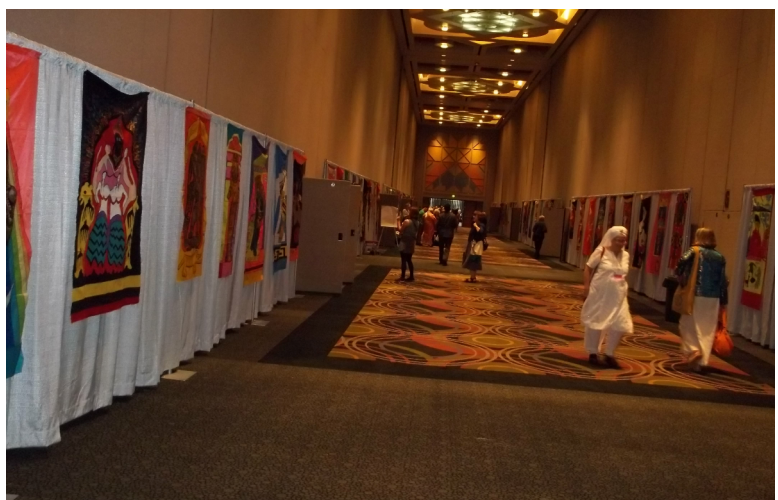
Parliament of the World’s Religions

Over the course of five days – October 15-19 – some 10,000 religious leaders and activists, representing approximately 50 faiths and spiritual movements, converged under the official title of “Reclaiming the Heart of Our Humanity: Working Together for a World of Compassion, Peace, Justice, and Sustainability.”

The place: Salt Palace convention centre, Salt Lake City, Utah. The event: the 2015 Parliament of the World’s Religions.

In exploring the Parliament’s main theme, a number of major subthemes and common threads were woven into the larger tapestry. The woman’s track was the most obvious, as the five-day event kick-started with the aforementioned Woman’s Assembly, followed by the first thematic plenary on the topic of women – which closed with Phyllis Curott, Chair of the Women’s Task Force and one of the “world’s first public Wiccan priestesses” reading the Parliament’s *Declaration on Women*.

Visually, the goddess meme was powerfully displayed on both sides of the Ballroom hallway. Walking along I counted 89 banners depicting goddess images from different religions and cultures. And on the second floor of the Salt Palace a “Woman’s Sacred Space” – the “Red Tent Temple” – was set up for rituals and sacred encounters. This, it was explained, was “the womb of the Parliament.”



Indigenous concerns and aboriginal spirituality comprised another Parliament theme. A daily *Indigenous Peoples' Dialogue* was held, discussing topics such as “Protection of Mother Earth” and “Indigenous Prophecies.” A procession of Indigenous spiritual leaders and drummers led the Parliament’s Opening Ceremony on Thursday evening, and the Indigenous Plenary – held on the 19th – reinforced the message of oneness and veneration to Mother Earth. Holding the Indigenous “spiritual energy,” a Sacred Fire was kept burning during the five days. As the Parliament agenda book explains,

“The Sacred Fire is lit at the sunrise ceremony on the first day. It then burns continuously, watched over by Fire Keepers and ceremony helpers, until the end of the gathering and then is left to burn until it extinguishes itself. It is believed that a Sacred Fire holds open a direct connection to the Creator, Mother Earth, the Spirit World, and our Ancestors as we convene.”

Climate change was another major theme, and the Climate Plenary started with a multi-faith children’s choir followed by opening words from Marc Barasch, founder of the Green World Campaign: “We’re here today to explore the connection between the life of the spirit and the fate of the Earth... We stand as one people under the same Tree of Life... and we are seeking, each in our own way, to harmonize a profound sense of oneness and wonder with the urgency of our times, so that Tree will continue to flourish.”

Karenn Gore, the Director of the Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and daughter to Al Gore, was the Climate Plenary moderator. Her father, the former Vice President of the United States, sent a special video message to those in attendance, reminding us that Pope Francis had earlier called on global action to “solve the climate crisis.”

Archbishop Bernardito Auza, holding the office of Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, represented the Catholic Church to the Parliament’s plenary on climate change. To this end, Auza noted Pope Francis’ connection between the “true right of the environment” and “social justice,” and that the Pope views this within the context of “integral ecology.” Auza then read a selection from the Pope’s encyclical *On the Care of Our Common Home*.

“When we speak of the ‘environment’, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.”

As the Archbishop explained, “the Earth, our Sister, mistreated and abused, is lamenting.” What we need, he said in reference to the Pope’s green vision, is an “ecological conversion.”

Chief Arvol Lookinghorse, another plenary speaker, told the crowd that we are at a crossroad – face the consequences of environmental destruction, or “unite spiritually in this global community.” Lookinghorse challenged the audience; “Mother Earth is sick and has a fever, so... stop

the fracking, stop that KXL, stop abusing Mother Earth.” [Note: Fracking is a petroleum extraction technique, and KXL refers to the Keystone XL Pipeline].

Later in the plenary, Chief Francois Paulette from the Canadian Northwest Territories – after telling us he was “servant to Mother Earth” – accused the Canadian oil-sand projects of destroying his way of life.

“What is sin?” asked Chief Paulette as he told us a story. “The greatest and the biggest sin that man can make, is to abuse Mother Earth.” And so, Paulette encouraged us to pressure policy makers in ending the era of fossil fuel, pointing to the petroleum industry of Fort McMurray in his talk.

One Climate Plenary speaker needs special mention, for he was given prominence in the Parliament agenda: Christian emergent leader Brian McLaren (see picture below).

“I don’t know which comes first,” McLaren said in his opening. “Do I love creation because I love the Creator, or do I love God because I can’t help but love the fish and the trees and the birds and the mountains and the fresh air? I don’t know which comes first, but I know that the two go inextricably together.”

McLaren told us that many of our faith stories are “destructive and harmful.”

“Our old stories, often said that God gave the Earth to humans, so they could use it however they wanted for their profit,” preached McLaren. “Those stories said that God would soon destroy the Earth, which gave powerful people a license to plunder it as if it were a store going out of business.”



Wrapping the “old stories” in the language of inequality – God favoring men over women, straight over gay, one faith over another – or that our old stories highlighted fate and personal enlightenment “while the rest of the world goes up in smoke” – McLaren implored the crowd to find a new way forward.

“Brothers and sisters, the Earth is singing to us, the Earth is crying to us, the Earth is groaning to us.” What is the Earth saying? That people of faith need to tell a new healing story, bigger and better and more gracious, “rooted in the diverse riches of our various traditions.” This new story, it was said, would lead us to “common and joint action.” Religions, he told us, must organize for the “common good” – creating a “global, passionate, dynamic movement of contemplative activists to heal the world and protect all living things.”

Other plenary sessions dealt with Emerging Leaders, Violence and Hate Speech, and Income Inequality. Personalities who spoke during the plenary on Income included Jim Wallis of Sojourners and New Thought minister Michael Beckwith, with video messages coming from the Dali Lama and the President of the World Bank.

With each speech and each standing ovation, we were affirming a “new story” for the planet.

Simply Too Much

I arrived at the Salt Palace the evening before the Parliament in order to pick up my agenda package. The convention center was bustling with activity; many hundreds of people were registering, others were setting up booths and displays, and a Jain temple was being constructed inside the main hallway.

Reading through the agenda was breathtaking: Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of lectures, workshops, panels, rituals, films, concerts, and side events – and of course, the main ceremonies and plenary sessions. Numerous art displays, a labyrinth, and even sound stations where you could listen to Pope Francis’ encyclical on ecology were available for Parliament attendees. There seemed to be no end of spiritually motivated activities. In fact, out of the 371-page agenda book, the five-day program schedule took up 180 pages, with each page describing four to six events. The rest of the book outlined the main assemblies, had letters from dignitaries and sundry information, exhibit hall listings, and 101 pages dedicated to speaker biographies.

It was simply too much for any single person to cover adequately. Thankfully, other evangelical Christian writers and apologists were in attendance, doing research, and engaging with the Biblical message of the gospel. We were thus able to compare notes, coordinate event coverage, offer encouragement, and assist each other in different ways. This was a tremendous blessing! Nevertheless, the range of options available *per hour* was staggering.

For myself, I attended twenty workshops and plenary assemblies. Time was also spent interacting in the massive exhibition gallery, gathering information and talking to people from different religions. During the five days, I took in a number of musical side-events, spent time around key locations such as the Jain temple and Buddhist Mandela, and observed rituals and ceremonies. Everywhere you looked, every hall and room, something was happening.

Here is a glimpse of a few workshops and lectures I attended:

The Role of the Divine Mother in Religion and Inter-Spirituality

This was part of the Inaugural Women's Assembly, and each speaker explored how the goddess manifests in ancient and modern ways. Here, it was said, we were entering a period of time between the "human and transhuman," and it would be through the power of the goddess that we could "touch the oneness that connects the all."

Diversity and Applied Theology in Contemporary Paganism

Gwendolyn Reece, a priestess of Athena and founder of the Sacred Space Foundation, talked about the pagan concept of citizenship, community, and cosmopolis. The idea of the world community, or world city – cosmopolis – "accepts the interconnection of all reality." After listening to a number of presenters, it was evident that the expansion of the pagan worldview into the broader culture has a specific socio-spiritual purpose: to re-create a sense of the sacred with the Earth, with each other, and with "non-human beings" in the evolution of divinity. As one speaker said, "We are the facilitators of the establishment of a New Age."

The Earth Charter and the New United Nations Development Agenda

For those who haven't heard of the *Earth Charter*, it's a brief but important declaration that lays out a new Earth-based values system. After the 1992 UN Earth Summit, Maurice Strong, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Steven Rockefeller initiated an *Earth Charter* drafting process. By the year 2000, this document was finalized and publically released. Since then, it has been embraced by a multitude of organizations, institutions, and global players.

During this session, Mary Evelyn Tucker – co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale – talked about the history of the Earth Charter, how it's "a great achievement of the collective good," and explained that the Charter is a guiding light for our age of transition. "We're migrating into a new period," Tucker said, "to our spawning home, the Earth community."

Kusumita Pedersen, a Parliament trustee and co-chair of the Interfaith Center of New York, described the Earth Charter in its "cosmic context" – a "sacred trust" – that speaks to the oneness of all.

In terms of its relationship to the UN Development Agenda, it was noted that the *Earth Charter* is a type of guiding light. Essentially, the *Charter* pushes the worldview that all is connected, and thus it acts as a value-system behind the Development Agenda. It was also explained that a shift is coming in terms of national economic indicators, moving from Gross Domestic Product to something holistic – possibly a Genuine Progress Indicator, as already implemented by the State of Maryland.

We Are The Earth: Pagans Respond to Pope Francis on the Environment

This was a fascinating panel as representatives from the pagan community discussed Pope Francis encyclical on the environment. Mixed feelings were evident. Although they generally agreed with the Earth-based nature of the encyclical, it was acknowledged that it was primarily aimed at Roman Catholics, even as its principles could be applied more broadly.

Andras Corban-Arthen, Parliament trustee, told us that his pagan side says the Pope is “one of us,” but his cynical, post-Catholic side still questions him. John Halstead, founder of the *Pagan Community Statement on the Environment*, pointed out that the encyclical refers to the Earth as “Sister” and “Mother,” and in eight places recognizes that everything is interconnected.

Halstead drew parallels between the Pagan statement and the Pope’s message, reading from the encyclical and a pagan text, and then asking if anyone could tell who wrote what. After reading a line from Pope Francis – “our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breath her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters” – Halstead commented,

“[The encyclical], interestingly, refers to the Earth as ‘her’ – in the feminine, it personifies the Earth. When I read that statement in the encyclical, I thought, those words could have been – and maybe have been – used in pagan rituals this summer. They could have been used at a pagan festival or at a cups ritual celebrating the turning the seasons.”

But while Halstead noted that, “Christians and Pagans can arrive at the same place by different paths,” and highlighted the Pope’s call for “ecological conversion,” he stressed that the encyclical’s language still favored an anthropocentric view. Deep ecology, we were reminded, challenges the humanity-above-nature approach.

During the Q&A, one Pagan talked about the need to assert our oneness through the “We,” as apposed to those who exemplify separateness through the power of economy. In other words, it’s time to re-establish community empowered Earth-sacredness over divisive monetary and individual interests. Separateness needs to be dismantled through collective efforts.

This elicited an interesting response from another Pagan panelist; “The first thing that came to my mind – and you can call me crazy – violent bloody revolution, because that’s the way it’s done [laughter from the audience]... that, however, is not what I advocate, but that’s a realistic way how it’s been dealt with in the past.”

But revolution, the same person explained, does not always work for the better and can birth something worse. Instead, an *internal change* approach was encouraged.

“I personally believe in working from the inside to change the outside. I believe there are ways that you work... as a journalist bringing voice... talking about it, collectively [through] grassroots efforts, teaching children – again, that’s one of my pet projects, is I go into schools and you teach the next generation so that when they get to be adults, they go into the systems with a different mindset.”

A Petition For the Establishment of a Religious Arm of the United Nations

Presented by the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America, this workshop introduced a petition to create a “Religious Arm of the United Nations.”

The bottom line: As the world faces tensions with root causes in religion, an interfaith UN body is needed as a global moral and spiritual guide. This group, it was explained, would operate beyond governments and political interests, and could direct the UN towards intervening within religiously based conflicts. As a cohesive body under the authority of the United Nations, this agency would speak as one voice, exemplifying world harmony and oneness.

Could such an agency come to fruition? Perhaps, but at this point the seed of the idea is just being planted. Although the Parliament provided the soil to nurture the concept, like other high-minded interfaith programs, this one too may deviate from its intended goal or simply dissolve. Interestingly, the presenters acknowledged the past failures of similar projects. Learning from prior mistakes, we were told, will be a priority.

On Mormonism

With the Parliament held in Salt Lake City, and only a stone’s throw from the Mormon Temple grounds, I was curious to see how the LDS would play into this carnival of religions. Would the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the Mormons, step into this arena?

Yes, but the relationship seemed to be arms-length, with the exception of a Sacred Music celebration.

Mormon representation was visible during the Opening Ceremony, but this was to be expected, after it all, it was Salt Lake City. Elder L. Whitney Clayton, the newly appointed senior president of the Presidency of the Seventy – an important position within the hierarchy of the LDS – welcomed everyone to the Parliament and acknowledged its interfaith context. His speech was cordial and relatively non-committal, presenting wishes of good will and harmony.

Workshops focusing on Mormon topics were part of the schedule, but compared to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Muslim and Pagan sessions, the Mormon footprint was minimal. Mormon oriented sessions included,

- “Mormon Feminists: Reclaiming the Blessings of our Heritage.”
- “Mormonism Among the World’s Religions and the 1893 Parliament.”
- “Evangelicals and Mormons Overcoming Hate Speech.”
- “Mormon Grassroots Humanitarian Initiatives.”
- “The LDS Tradition of Environmental Stewardship.”

Individual Mormons were involved in the Parliament as volunteers and attendees. But it was Sunday evening when the LDS publically linked itself to the interfaith vision.

On October 18, the Salt Lake Tabernacle hosted a Sacred Music Night, a multi-faith worship extravaganza within the Temple Square – *hallowed ground for the LDS*. For two hours the Tabernacle resonated with Burundi drummers, the cosmic whirling of Sufi Dervishes, an Islamic Call to Prayer, the Baha'i Choir, and expressions from Hindu, Buddhist, Indigenous, Sikh, Jain, Christian and Jewish traditions. It was an implicit, if not explicit message, guided by the actions in the Tabernacle, that a broader spirituality can be celebrated.

On Islam

Muslim representation at the 2015 gathering was *substantial*, starting with the Parliament's chairperson: Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid, a noteworthy Chicago-based Islamic scholar who has vocally denounced terrorism.

Another point of contact was the Parliament's main sponsor: KAICIID – the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, a Saudi-based interfaith and inter-governmental organization. Before its inauguration in November 2012, the push to create KAICIID gained traction when King Abdullah and Pope Benedict met in 2007. After this historic meeting, the KACIID project went through a series of high-level dialogues, eventually receiving support from the United Nations Secretary General. In 2011 a special agreement was signed between Spain, Austria, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, granting a home for KAICIID in Vienna. Approximately one year later, the organization officially opened its doors, with the Holy See as a founding Observer.

KAICIID's involvement in the Parliament was extensive. Besides acting as the lead sponsor, the body organized an interfaith peace-building workshop, social media training sessions, a Youth Forum, and was patron to the Emerging Leaders Plenary.

Islamic involvement took place in other ways. An abundance of workshops and shared sessions on Muslim topics, led by Muslim scholars and personalities, were available in the daily schedule. Here are some examples,

- "How Muslim and Catholic College Students Do Dialogue"
- "Islamic Tolerance."
- "Humanity is One."
- "The Islamophobia Industry: The Okay Racism of Our Times."
- "Eliminate Violence in the Name of God and a Strategy to Counter Extremism."
- "Why ISIS is Not Islamic."
- "Combating Islamophobia."
- "Humanity at the Heart of Islam."
- "American Muslims for Palestine."
- "The Quran, the Proclaimer of Tolerance and Lenience."

Islamic representation was also visible in workshops with more generalized topics. For example, I attended a shared session titled *Recovering the Heart of our Global Family* wherein Buddhists and Muslims talked about interdependence, joint interfaith programs, and points of commonality in contemplative practices.

Recognizable Islamic personalities at the Parliament included,

- Tariq Ramadan: Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at St. Antony's College (Oxford), and grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Tariq is considered as one of the most influential people in the world.
- Eboo Patel: Founder of Interfaith Youth Core and a member of US President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighborhood Partnerships.
- Rami Nashashibi: Executive Director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network.

But one Muslim leader stood out due to his high position within global Islam.

Sheikh Saleh Abdullah bin Humaid (pictured below with his translator speaking), the former Chief Justice of Saudi Arabia and an Imam in the Grand Mosque at Mecca – also known as the Sacred Mosque – was a major speaker during the Climate Plenary. The very fact that one of the Grand Mosque's eleven Imams was present at the Parliament struck me, for he represents the custodian mosque of Islam's holiest site, the Kaaba. Indeed, the Sacred Mosque *entirely surrounds the Kaaba*.

Abdullah bin Humaid spoke of the common struggles that push us towards greater cooperation. Mankind, he explained, has caused global problems – from environmental stresses to poverty – and that these troubles, and more, are rooted in climate change. There is a need for “balance in all things,” he explained, further noting that Islam forbids extravagance and waste. Poverty, the result of a “poor distribution of wealth,” was described as an international problem that can be addressed by Islamic structures. Materialism must be overcome.



He also talked about religious extremism, telling us that a framework is necessary to cure this pressing crisis. Islam, he elaborated, has been wrongfully vilified by certain sections of the media, for the victims of terrorism have been predominantly Muslims. “It is true,” he further stated, “that there are many terror groups who claim a misguided monopoly over Islam. They carry out bombings against Muslims and non-Muslims alike...”

The *Quran* and Islamic legislation, he said, are “in total opposition to these beliefs.”

Applause rose from the audience.

I found this last position to be especially troubling, for in 1995 Abdullah bin Humaid penned a document supporting Jihad, demonstrating from the *Quran* and Sunnah that Allah rewards those who are killed or martyred in the cause of Jihad; “Let those (believers) who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter, fight in the Cause of Allaah; and who so fights in the Cause of Allaah and is killed or gets victory, We shall bestow on him a great reward. (4:74).”

“Jihad is a great deed indeed and there is no deed whose reward or blessing is as that of it” wrote the Imam in his tract, *Jihad in the Qur’ann and Sunnah*, “and for this reason, it is the best thing that one can volunteer for” (p.11).

Although it was written twenty years ago, the Imam’s article has been celebrated as a defense of violent Jihad, and as far as I know, Abdullah bin Humaid has never denounced his paper.

Over the years I’ve attended a number of interfaith events, and every gathering has had an Islamic presence. Three observations arise.

1. Some Muslims genuinely believe in the prospects of multi-faith coexistence and collective peace. In other words, non-Muslims can keep their religions and Muslims will hold onto their own faith, and each will work together to build global unity.
2. Some Muslims proclaim peace and togetherness in the context of interfaithism, but do not actually believe in the multi-faith position of equality among all religions. In reality, their involvement is geared to promoting Islam for political and social acceptance.
3. The condemnation of Islamic extremism by Muslims at interfaith events creates pressure for other religions to do the same within their own community, especially with Christian representation. The logic goes something like this: “As our interfaith Muslim brothers are denouncing Islamic fundamentalism, we too must curb Christian extremists.”

The cause-and-effect social pressure in point 3 is a false narrative; Muslim extremists employ violence to assert Islam, and not unlike Abdullah bin Humaid, they reference chapter 4, verse 74 of the *Quran* as justification for their bloody enterprise. Roughly speaking, if you oppose the teachings of Islam and are therefore an enemy of the *Quran*, then Jihad “with the hand” may be leveled against you. As explained in Humaid’s 1995 paper, Jihad with “the hand” is about waging physical violence in the cause of Allah.

Christian “fundamentalism,” conversely, does not mirror the actions of Islamic extremism; believers in Jesus Christ as the exclusive way of salvation – for that is the basis of “Christian fun-

damentalism” – do not car-bomb marketplaces or shoot-up the patrons of restaurants or theaters, or take schoolgirls hostage and subject them to rape and slavery, or behead those who disagree with them.

Christian extremists/fundamentalists *do follow the Biblical Scriptures*: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). This is expressed in a number of tangible ways; to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44), to live like the “Good Samaritan,” to be “salt and light” to the world, to assist orphans and widows, to speak truth with love, and to consider others ahead of yourself. “Christian fundamentalists” are to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:19) and like the Apostles in Acts 1, to be witnesses of Jesus Christ both near-and-far. This happens by having a ready answer to those who ask of our hope (1 Peter 3:15), and to be as Paul in Athens (Acts 17), speaking the truth with conviction and grace while interacting in a pagan culture.

The message of the exclusivity of Jesus Christ certainly divides, as it dismantles human justification and self-salvation, thus exposing our religions – be they secular or otherwise – as insufficient and illusionary. Christian “fundamentalists” hold to this Biblical paradigm, presenting the “good news” of Jesus Christ in words along with deeds of love.

Associating Islamic extremists with Christian’s who adhere to the fundamentals of their faith is fallacious. But it is not typically Muslims who do this within the interfaith context, although it happens. Rather, it’s usually Christian representatives who take the bait and regurgitate the innuendo into something more pointed: The Muslims are doing something to curb their extremists, and it’s time we do the same with our fundamentalists.

The result is predicable: As the world pushes against Christians who uphold the Biblical standard of salvific exclusivity, expect voices from within the “Christian camp” to do the same.

One for All

Although the official motto of the Parliament was “Reclaiming the Heart of Our Humanity,” the overarching message was *Oneness*: Humanity, Nature and Divinity all share the same essence. *We are One*, was the repetitious reminder. In fact, if we turn the motto into a question, “how do we reclaim the heart of humanity?” The answer is this: Act as One. If we seek to know what it means to be “fully human,” with our collective hearts united and acting as One, the conclusion looks like this: To be as God.

We are the only ones who can save Mother Earth, who can bring guidance and wisdom into chaos. *We* are the messiah of humanity and nature. Reclaiming the Heart of our Humanity means re-asserting the claim to our Divinity. *We are One*.

This central tenant was observable from beginning to end.

It was in the song of the Inaugural Women’s Assembly: “We are one with all life... We are one with the one.”

It was embedded in the Parliament anthem that rang out during the Opening Ceremony: “We are the wind. We are the sea. We are the rivers. We are the trees. We are the mountains. We are the bees. Hold the earth as our beloved, reclaim humanity.”

It was visible in the artwork found in the Cultural Hall, such as the Aspiration Project’s community mural, a 6’X30’ wall hanging where participants could leave messages of world unity and Oneness – and yes, I added a message too: *The real God is distinct and separate from nature and humanity.*

It was embedded throughout the Exhibitor’s Hall: from the very nice lady I talked to at the Aumism display – Aumism is a new, Hindu-based religion that synthesizes all faiths “to save Mother Earth” (she couldn’t grasp that an alternative to Oneness could even exist) – to the Uran-tia booth with its message of “all is one,” to the literature from Nithyanandam University: “Yoga is the largest practiced religion today in the world... [Yoga] is the continuous ‘uniting’ of the mind-body-being into the space of *advaita*, oneness.”

It was celebrated during the plenary sessions in songs, prayers, and speeches.

It was experienced in the *many* rituals, such as the Cosmic Mass; the Mystical Christian Communion For All; the Transmission Meditation; and One Planet Worship, to name just a few.

And in the myriad of lectures and workshops, the concept of Oneness was explored and expounded, day after day.

But how can Oneness exist when so many religions contradict and clash at important junctions? What do we do with the multitude of different doctrines and divergent teachings?

That was the topic of an October 17th session titled *Searching For Unity With Diversity: Are We Really All One?*

With such an intriguing topic, it didn’t take long and the room was full.

Interfaith minister Philip Goldberg, author of *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation, How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* – a book that made the American Library Association 2011 top ten list in religious non-fiction – opened the session and explained that we can find unity in many areas: common purpose, action in the world, ethical principles, biology, and in environmental and ecological matters. But real Oneness transcends those outer dimensions, and this is what the session focused on.

“We are each other,” Goldberg told the assembly.

“I am you, you are me... It is that level of unification and oneness that we wanted to address this morning, because, we thought, it is the most fundamental level of unity: the



most fundamental level of oneness. And it's not to be found just in reasoning or in dialogue, it's to be found in the direct experience of that reality within ourselves. ”

“To see the divinity in other people,” Goldberg said, “that is a wonderful thing.” However, this acknowledgment must be predicated upon something contextual, as Goldberg explained.

“It is... on the level of direct experience where you *perceive* the divinity in ourselves and in other people, and not just think about it, that true oneness is to be found. And this is not just an intellectual construct – but there's practical reality because it's in transcending that usual source of identity and identification that [we] awaken to the divinity within ourselves – that spiritual transformation takes place, and transformational consciousness takes place, and the opening of the human heart takes place. So that acting from compassion, and acting from care and concern for others and the planet, does not have to be an effort, because we see the divinity in all things.”

But how does this take place? Direct experience via contemplative mysticism – and any person can do it, not just the sages and spiritual luminaries.

Demonstrating this experiential based oneness, Goldberg asked everyone to quiet their minds and think back to a personal and sublime spiritual experience – “where something happened deep within you that was, at least to some extent, transformative, where you felt an experience, a connection to divinity as you understand it... just reflect on that for a minute or two.”

Then he asked the audience to explain the memory of this experience with a word or key phrase from everyday language, and not to use the verbiage of your religious tradition.

Shouts rang out: “Reunion,” “transcendental,” “you belong here,” “interconnected,” “expansion,” “oneness,” “encounter,” “luminous,” “joy,” “mind blowing,” “comfort,” “love...”

He then asked, “How many of you relate to those terms?”

A forest of hands arose in affirmation.

And that was the point: Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Pagans, Sikhs, Taoists, New Agers, Shamans – all could *experientially* relate to the *spiritually-derived* feeling of divinity and oneness.

Facts didn't matter, doctrine was unimportant, theology was meaningless, and divergent truth claims were laid to rest. The boundaries that separated us dissolved, for the exuberant feeling of oneness was the same for all; it was simply derived through different pathways.

I waked away with three thoughts:

1. The feeling of oneness is just that, a *feeling*, and this sense of connection and expansion can be encountered through a spectrum of activities and practices: Contemplative meditation, in the whirl of Sufi Dervishes, through Yoga, in the collective energy of a crowd, on the dance floor of a rave, in the grandeur or quietness of nature, through psychedelic substances, and in solitary or group rituals. It can happen in religious *and* secular settings,

and it can be an inward or an outward manifestation: the mystical inner journey, or the overwhelming impression from an event or movement outside oneself. And this causes me to consider that maybe the feeling of oneness is psychologically (and chemically) triggered, or is a cathartic or emotive state. Could there be a spiritual aspect? Certainly, and even more so in that we place religious meaning upon the feeling – even using it to justify spiritual positions.

2. Christians need to be especially careful when considering experiential and powerful emotive encounters, for the subsequent feeling can be mistaken for God's presence. "God was really moving" or, "I could feel the spirit of God," are statements I've heard after Christian worship services and through the dynamics of other Christian settings. I remember one young man telling me about a specific worship service: "I could feel God on my skin, I could sense Him in my scalp. With every breath, I inhaled and exhaled God." Goldberg would describe this as the "direct experience" of oneness.

Do feelings and emotions play a role in our worship? Yes, but our "spiritually charged" experiences – whether generated inwardly or outwardly, through contemporary or traditional channels – are not guideposts to "spiritual maturity" or a reference point to determine theological truths. Indeed, we run a serious risk when we orient that feeling to a higher reality.

3. A world-wide "spiritual" experience, literally an emotive and collective encounter that brings a profound mind change could, theoretically, be a catalyst to recognize that we are what former United Nations official Robert Muller once wrote, the "planet of God." Global citizenship education and the pressure of our "planetary correct" culture have already conditioned this response in the hearts of many people. The Parliament of the World's Religions itself was a testament to that collective possibility.

Conclusion

The history of the Parliament of the World's Religions is reflective of the spiritual and cultural change of seasons.

In 1893, the first Parliament was held in Chicago, IL. Those decades preceding the 20th Century witnessed an upsurge in new religions and esoteric movements, and the Parliament was fertile ground for the opening of the Western mind to the Eastern perspective. It was also the seedbed for the modern interfaith movement (see, Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*, SCM Press, 1992).

The next Parliament took place in 1993 – again in Chicago – and it energized a renewed excitement in interfaith work and the quest for global unity. About 3,000 religious leaders attended, and it was from this venue that a "global ethic" was launched.

In 1999 the Parliament was held in Cape Town, South Africa, and was attended by such dignitaries as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. Approximately 7,000 people took part as the inter-faith community looked forward to a new century.

Two other Parliaments took shape after Cape Town: Barcelona 2004, and Melbourne, 2009. The Spain event witnessed 9,000 participants, and the Parliament was directly linked to the UNESCO-sponsored Universal Forum of Cultures. And in 2009, the Australian event brought 6,500 people together, including former US president Jimmy Carter.

With the above history in mind, the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions in Salt Lake City ended on a high point. Chairman Mujahid announced that, instead of hosting a gathering once every five years or so, momentum was now propelling the Parliament to meet every *two years*. The date and location was not yet solidified, but the machinery was already in place for a "Parliament in two years."

Setting the stage for the Parliament's continued pursuit of global harmony, a comment during the Closing Ceremony captured it all: "Togetherness is the key. Oneness is the key. And if oneness is there, things change. Fast." *FC*

Hindu girls reading cards with the "third eye." I wrote out John 14:6, and they read it through layers of cotton, masks, and scarves.



Peace Angels!



Tibetan Buddhist monks creating a Mandala.



A woman venerating the idol in the Jain Temple.

