

The Parliament of the World's Religions

Chicago 1893—1993

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Nearly eight thousand people from more than 125 countries participated in the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions from August 28 to September 5. This gathering marked the centennial of the historic 1893 parliament which for the first time assembled in the West leaders of all the world's major religions.

Susan Warden, a Kwan Um School of Zen member from Wausau, Wisconsin, said, "One of the most striking initial and enduring images throughout the conference was the lobby at the hotel—a wildly colorful (both in skin and dress) assemblage of humanity conversing, sitting on luggage, resting, meeting friends, etc."

Do An Sunim, JDPS, also noted the hotel lobby was overwhelming. "You had Jains, Tibetan lamas, Native American medicine men, swamis, Trappist monks, Taoist priests. Here they were, representatives of the world's religions in the most ordinary of circumstances, a hotel lobby; for once, nothing special."

Zen Master Seung Sahn participa-

tion in the parliament was highlighted by a major dharma speech on the last day of the gathering. Along with Mr. Edward Rim, he hosted a dinner for all the Buddhist monks at the parliament. The School's participation was organized by Ron Kidd, abbot of the Bultasa Zen Group in Chicago.

The number of events at the parliament was staggering. When you walked in the door, you were presented with a 150-page catalog listing over 200 events available to attend each day during the nine-day gathering... enough to give any spiritual seeker indigestion. Much of Chicago was somehow involved. Many events took place at other well-known Chicago institutions

With virtually every religious and spiritual tradition represented, topics were diverse: "Christian Ecology: Dialogue with Buddhism and the Native American Tradition," "Rastafarians: The Mystics of the Caribbean," "The Divine Feminine: Wicca and the World's Religions," "The Role of a Priestess/Priest in the Fellowship of

Isis," "Traditional African Religion: The Worship of Ifa, Orisha and the Ancestors by African Americans," "Similarities Between Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism," "The Problems and Hazards of Religious Pluralism," and hundreds more.

Every morning at sunrise there was a choice of prayer and meditation services sponsored by a number of groups, and every evening there were interfaith worship celebrations. The morning services satisfied anyone's thirst to taste spiritual variety. One morning a Jain master, tall with draping white hair and beard, led a group in a guided visualization meditation, and Theravadan monks chanted and led meditation. On another morning Native Americans invoked blessings for all present, shared a sacred pipe and corn pollen.

Describing some of the events she attended, Susan Warden said, "One of my first sessions was a presentation by Sulak Sivaraksa, the Thai founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. His is a call for the return of buddhism with a small 'b' that refutes exploitation and actively works against the three root causes of suffering—greed, hate, and illusion. He exhorted us to cultivate 'seeds of peace' starting with dana (generosity) and sila (precepts). 'Precepts are instructions for behavior so we do not exploit ourselves or others. We must actively reduce and eliminate violence in order to keep our precepts.'

"The next morning I attended a performance of *Mothertongue*, a group of pagan performers. There was a magician, a cauldron of fire, erotic dancing, candlelight, long robes decorated with celestial symbols, and wonderful singing that led us through the pagan seasons of the year. I wasn't sure what these folks believe or actually do to support that belief, but I had a taste of the fervor and minds of the performers. The hour was a needed break from the reverential seriousness of some of the conference.

“Then I attended a ninety-minute session on Catholic contemplative prayer. A delightfully straightforward nun gave an extremely interesting and coherent chronological account of the three main contemplative traditions within the Catholic Church. This took eighty minutes and with ten minutes to go (‘We still have time,’ I’m thinking), the nun said she was sorry we wouldn’t actually be able to experience centering prayer, because a) it was sort of scared, b) a session at a conference wasn’t a very good place for it, and c) it required hours of instruction in order to really experience it. Everyone in the room nodded their heads in understanding except me.

“From there I went to an emotionally moving panel given by three Native American women who discussed their heritage and their suffering. I heard stories of persecution and genocide, and was left with a feeling of horrified incredulity. The women were very direct in their condemnation of the pseudo-shamans, pseudo-sweat lodges, and pseudo-Native American experiences being offered for sale these days and gave practical tips for distinguishing authentic teachers from frauds. They also talked about the importance of name-giving in their culture and how their names shaped their lives. One woman felt very blessed by her name which means ‘When they see her, they see something good!’”

The centerpiece of the parliament was the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. The 250-member assembly met on three consecutive days to address a variety of issues facing humanity in the world today. “What an amazing assembly of people,” noted Do An Sunim. “There I was, sitting next to Zen Master Seung Sahn. Next to him was Pete Catches, a Lakota holy man. At the next table was the Dalai Lama. Two tables over from him was Louis Farakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam.”

One afternoon during the assembly, everyone was talking about many different ideas. As the afternoon wore on, there were so many types of teaching that Mu Sang Sunim noted that people began getting a little bored. People just weren’t listening to each. Finally Zen Master Seung Sahn said, “Why don’t we all try a little silence

practicing?”—he didn’t say meditation, he just said silence. In silence, he said, we can digest our understanding and make wisdom. Everyone agreed. After ten minutes of silence together, people were more relaxed, more open, happier and could really listen to one another. Mu Sang Sunim said it was a great demonstration of primary point and how it worked.

“Catholic monks are interesting,” commented Do Mun Sunim, JDPS. “The ones that we have met here at the parliament, we seem to connect with. Maybe because they have the practice of contemplation. A Catholic priest/monk sitting at our table told me that some Zen meditation had helped him recover his faith, direction and connection with himself at a point of spiritual crisis. Being at the assembly reminded me once again not to be

in awe of spiritual leaders, and how we really have to *do* it and attain it. We aren’t going to be able to depend on religious leaders—on anybody.”

For myself, the parliament was an enormous event but the memories are specific: a roommate who called himself a “Zen Judhist;” Zen Master Seung Sahn giving my young son his first set of prayer beads; meeting His Eminence Paulos Mar Gregorios, Metropolitan of Delhi and the North Syrian Orthodox Church of India, in an empty hallway outside my room; sitting in the lounge drinking a glass of beer with a friend.

Checking the parliament’s incredible human diversity would have been wearisome, and if you didn’t know it before, this was the perfect event to appreciate it.

Zen Master Seung Sahn was asked, “What is the meaning of everyone coming together for this Parliament of the World’s Religions, and what can we learn from it?” He said that during the week there had been close communication between many different kinds of religion. “The big meaning was to attain primary point, return to your original situation, condition and relationship—then help society. That is the big meaning, but nobody understands that.” He referred to the ten minutes of silence he had with the group of religious leaders... “silence means that human beings can wake up, and that is very important.”

