# At the Parliament of Religions: Notes from Cape Town

by Richard Luecke in the February 2, 2000 issue

When Cardinal Joseph Bernardin was asked in 1993 why he was attending a "parliament of the world's religions," he answered that we are told to "welcome strangers," that many things are happening in the world which people of different religions need to confront jointly, and that Christians can find such a gathering a unique occasion to talk about Jesus.

These or similar reasons brought more than 7,000 people from more than 50 countries to Cape Town, South Africa, in December for the third such "parliament." The first (which gave this inexact name to a nonlegislative assembly) convened in Chicago with the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893; the second, 100 years later in the same city. The assembly in Cape Town proposed that the parliament gather every five years in one of the world's strategic places.

People who seemed like exotic strangers to one another in 1893 now often live on the same block in world cities. At the 1893 assembly Swami Vivekenanda introduced Vedanta to the West; today that wisdom is represented by Hindu temples and centers in many Western cities and suburbs. Jains, Sikhs and Zarathustri, whose religions were introduced to many Chicagoans at the 1993 gathering, helped plan and lead the 1999 assembly.

Many of the presentations and booths at Cape Town offered introductions to the various religious traditions. Every morning Native American tribal leaders filmed their conversations for use in a society which has yet to acquire their ecological awareness. South African *inyangas* and *sangomas* wore the paint of herbalists and healers while communicating with one another by cellular phones. The major drumming of this assembly was by a Japanese ensemble representing Shinji Shumeikai—a spiritual organization that now has outreach centers in America.

The assembly's constituency was largely self-selected. Parliaments of religion attract people who like and can afford to come to this sort of gathering. Three influential

bishops and some engaging young people who were drawn by the “Next Generation” program were the only participants from Latin America. Few evangelicals or Pentecostals attended.

The “Global Ethic” signed by religious leaders in ’93 and by many people worldwide during the intervening years supplied the rationale for “A Call to Our Guiding Institutions.” Follow-up discussions of the global ethic repeated its theme—”no peace among the nations without peace among the religions”—and then concentrated on the ethics of nonviolence in the resolution of intergroup conflicts. After the ’93 meeting, an International Peace Council made up of notable religious figures began accepting invitations to intervene in various trouble spots. More continuous, often costly, initiatives for peace are being taken up by the religious communities in such places. But the parliament’s basic goal—that people of different religions should stop killing each other, and stop letting their creeds heat up ordinary disputes into religious warfare—is far from achieved.

The new “Call” urged leaders in religion, politics, business, education, media and the sciences to reassess their goals for the new century. In a science-and-religion symposium, scholars of many faiths discussed the resources and challenges that the scientific discoveries of the past century offer to the religions, and the role that religions can play in raising ethical questions about the sponsorship and direction of research. A research group that has devoted the past two decades to making “Global 2000” projections used computer models to point religious constituencies toward a revised view of progress and of ways of living that make for peace, justice and sustainability. A symposium on sustainable development advocated a city-based approach in which congregations can take initiatives. A number of sessions focused on the present draft of the Earth Charter and on local initiatives that can be taken on the way toward its worldwide adoption.

A weeklong forum on South Africa addressed business and workplace ethics in that context. It considered strategies of reinvestment that would benefit labor and the community, including entrepreneurial training with microcredit in stages. The forum discussed local and international loan policies and criteria for the formation of new funds, as well as Jubilee debt-forgiveness. A new Sakhaisizwe Trust, under the auspices of the South African Council of Churches, allows religious communities, especially those that invest pension funds, to play a significant role in the country’s economy.

Reports on the World Trade Organization’s November meeting in Seattle, with its attendant protests, made people aware of the diminishing authority of nation states in the global market. Some panelists hoped that in this new context nongovernmental organizations would begin to exert greater influence.

None of this took place under the direct auspices of formal religious bodies. Instead of formulating statements and resolutions, the parliament called for “gifts of service to the world.” A working assembly of 400 spiritual and religious leaders devoted three days to charting and connecting hundreds of initiatives bearing on stated priorities: building bridges of understanding and cooperation, celebrating life and its possibilities, fostering creative engagement, meeting essential needs, nurturing community, offering sacred practice and defending human rights. A Web site to which all registrants have free, private access for exchanging information or consulting with one another was a preparliament gift.

People bearing placards and tracts appeared outside the assembly halls. Some charged that Christians who participate in this kind of meeting fail to present their faith in its uniqueness. Parliament presentations typically do focus on practice and experience rather than on teachings. The comparative reluctance of Christian participants to repeat their story or talk about their doctrinal convictions may reflect a sense that the content of their faith is already well known, or it may reflect an inhibiting sense of economic and geopolitical disparities. This could change as a result of the growing numbers of Christians in the southern hemisphere. If reflection on a sacred narrative is what gives point and vitality to practical discourse within a religious communion, why should this not be included in an open discussion between communions?

With the parliament’s variety of religions came a variety of proposals for interaction between the faiths. The conscientious “exclusivity” expressed by the protesters was met by the “inclusivity” of people who think other faiths are encompassed, at least in essence, by their own. A panel of religious scholars investigated the assumption that the world’s religions have a common core that can be expressed in general terms. A program of spiritual mentors affirmed the universal possession of a “mystic heart,” best acknowledged and realized in side-by-side silence and perhaps in common action. For most participants, the space between silence and action is occupied by a plurality of cultural-linguistic houses furnished by people, events, liturgies and teachings that the occupants regard as not readily dispensable.

All these houses have windows. A workshop on “mutual irradiation” included testimonies showing how something in another religion can help one recover or can illumine something in one’s own. Jewish “self-transcendence” is freshened by its encounter with a similar emphasis in Hinduism. A Buddhist and a Christian think more penetratingly about emptiness and kenosis as a result of their encounter.

The memory of the Holocaust brings a sense of the deus absconditus—of the hidden or suffering God—to adherents of various religions. It moves them to a level of fear and trembling, humility and contrition, the dropping of pretensions and conceit that, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, forms the proper basis for meeting people of other religious traditions. One mutual influence now seems far advanced: contemplatives are showing faith-and-works people how to sit and interiorize their faith; the latter are modeling faithful social action for contemplatives.

The parliaments to date are best described as demonstrations. The actions that result from them, though informally linked, are variously chosen and based. No institutional transformations have yet occurred. Yet this gathering of wondrously garbed spiritual and religious leaders from all lands is unique—as is the limitation of many of the speeches to a word for peace or a brief blessing.

Two major evening addresses demonstrated the effects of interreligious communication. The Dalai Lama moved beyond customary Buddhist themes to urge action and perseverance in common undertakings. Nelson Mandela moved beyond formal politics to describe the role of religion in his nation’s liberation struggle. He named, along with the tribal religions, four world religions which had taught him and others of his country’s future leaders to read, had opposed apartheid, had endorsed strategic economic sanctions and had helped elicit truth from silent graves and sealed lips. The religions would continue to play a crucial and decisive role in his country’s future.

When members of the parliament marched from the opening ceremonies to District Six, where a once-vital Muslim community had been leveled by bulldozers, they dramatized their stated themes of meeting essential needs, pursuing universal human rights, fostering creative engagement, and celebrating life and its possibilities in a way that could be adapted and repeated around the world. Fittingly, the next assembly of the world’s religions plans to hear reports from the world’s cities.