

Parliament of World Religions convenes in Mormon country

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October 14, 2015

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) When the World's Parliament of Religions first met in Chicago in 1893, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and even Spiritualists prayed together.

But Mormons were kept out.

What a difference 122 years make. On Thursday (October 15), when the Parliament of the World's Religions—a slight adjustment of the name was made a century after the first meeting—convenes in Salt Lake City, it will not only feature a slate of Mormon voices, it will sit in the proverbial lap of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, its global headquarters only a five-minute walk away.

The selection of this city is no coincidence, organizers and participants say, but a clear sign that both the LDS church and the parliament have evolved.

"It speaks to the fact that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a world religion and we are being recognized as such on the world stage," said Rachel Mabey Whipple, a Mormon environmentalist who will speak about Mormonism and sustainability at the event. "It shows a confidence that we are able to bring these other faith leaders to our community, and that is a great amount of maturity that I don't know that we have always had."

The parliament, which closes Monday, is expected to attract between 8,000 and 10,000 participants from 80 countries and 50 spiritual or faith traditions. This is the first time the parliament has met on U.S. soil since 1993, when it was held in Chicago. Recent meetings have been in Spain, Australia, and South Africa.

Other voices shut out of the first parliament will be in Salt Lake City, too. No Native American faiths were included at the 19th-century gathering, but now they make up

a significant portion of speakers and participants, and some have set up tepees and other native dwellings outside the Salt Palace convention site. Leaders of Native American and other indigenous faiths will tackle topics as wide-ranging as teen suicide and the wisdom of grandmothers.

“It’s about time they begin to listen to” Native Americans and indigenous peoples, said Arnold Thomas, a Shoshone-Paiute tribal member who will speak. “We have not always been considered human beings” by some of the faiths represented at the parliament in the past, he added.

Atheists will have a presence, too, in a session with religious leaders on human suffering. David Silverman, president of American Atheists—which held its annual convention in Salt Lake City earlier this year—said including nonbelievers makes the parliament truly interfaith.

“When the entire community is represented, people can truly unite with all their neighbors toward a common goal, without any outsiders at all,” Silverman wrote in an e-mail. “Everyone is equal, regardless of religious belief.”

Everyone may be equal, but not everyone is counted among the attendees. Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, and Pentecostal Christians do not attend in any strength or send official representatives, with the bulk of Christians coming from mainline Protestant denominations. Most Eastern faiths send representatives, and the Dalai Lama was scheduled to speak until ill health forced him to cancel.

What inclusivity there is has been neither swift nor smooth. The first parliament, held in the wake of the tremendously popular World’s Columbian Exposition, was groundbreaking for its inclusion of Eastern religions. Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Baha’i faith were introduced to Americans from the parliament’s stage, set in what is now the Art Institute of Chicago.

But Mormons were mostly shunned. A lone Mormon woman was allowed to address a smaller auxiliary meeting of women at the event.

The problem was polygamy. The LDS church banned plural marriage in 1890, but many Mormons still practiced it. Today only splinter Mormons not associated with the church embrace polygamy.

And therein lies a huge irony, said Andrea Radke-Moss, a Mormon historian and feminist also among this week's speakers. In 1893, Mormons were excluded because their ideas of marriage and family were too radical. But Mormon elder L. Whitney Clayton, the highest-ranking church official at this year's parliament and one of its featured speakers, will likely address the church's support of traditional marriage and sexuality.

Radke-Moss commended the parliament's embrace of Mormons and other once-excluded faith traditions. But she laments what she sees as a scarcity of female Mormon voices—even though this year's meeting will specially focus on women in religious traditions, with an entire day given over to a Women's Assembly. While one smaller session will examine Mormon feminism, only author Terry Tempest Williams is among the parliament's main speakers, and she is expected to focus on environmentalism, not her background in the Mormon faith, of which she has been an outspoken critic.

"Mormon women are still not completely invited to the table, even in Salt Lake City," Radke-Moss said.