

## Parliament of Religions, 1993 and Beyond

*Summary: At the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, the World's Parliament of Religions gathered leaders from religions across the globe to present on their own traditions and meet members of other traditions. One hundred years later, inspired by the increased diversity of Chicago's—and America's—religious landscape, a consortium of different religious organizations held a centennial gathering. Since then, the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions has held periodic conventions with the goal of finding common ground between different religious and spiritual communities and shaping a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.*

In 1893, visitors of the World's Fair in Chicago marveled at the Parliament of Religions, a landmark meeting of delegates from the world's religious traditions. In keeping with the international flavor and spectacle of the Columbian Exposition, this meeting represented the first attempt at a planned worldwide interfaith dialogue. The World's Parliament of Religions set the stage for future encounters and highlighted the possibility of more conversations to come.

However, nearly 100 years passed before a Chicago-based group, the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions, began planning for a centennial of the 1893 Parliament. The 1993 Parliament was intended to be more religiously diverse than its predecessor, in part because Chicago itself had changed with the influx of post-1965 immigrants of many faiths. As one of the planners explained, "We realized that the basic elements of a parliament are already here in Chicago. We just didn't know each other and rarely talked together." Many religious communities became involved in organizing the event, forming fourteen host-committees including a Hindu Host Committee, a Buddhist Host Committee, and so forth. The communities that were guests in 1893 became the hosts of 1993.

By the early 1990s, Chicago was home to between fifty and seventy mosques serving a diverse Muslim population that included African Americans, South Asians, Palestinians, and Bosnians. Two large Hindu temples had recently been built in the suburbs of Aurora and Lemont, adding to a dozen others in the city. The Sikh community had built a beautiful *gurdwara* in Palatine and the Jains had just opened a large Jain temple in Bartlett. There was a range of Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox churches and the whole spectrum of Jewish congregations. Chicago's Buddhists included Thai, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Japanese, Chinese and Korean immigrants and many American-born converts. On the

centennial revival of the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions, Chicago mirrored the diversity of the world and, increasingly, the diversity of America itself.

The opening ceremonies in 1893 had begun with the Protestant hymn “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow.” A century later, the procession of religious leaders entered the hall to the invocations of Tibetan monks alongside cymbals, drums, and polyphonic chanting. For nearly an hour, the many ranks of the procession passed through the enormous ballroom of the Palmer House in downtown Chicago. There were Christians of all denominations, Buddhists, Hindus, Wiccans, Zoroastrians, Muslims, Bahá'ís, and Native Americans. The saffron-robed Buddhist monks were from temples in Los Angeles and West Virginia, the Jains from Elmhurst, Illinois and Cypress, California, the Zoroastrians from Houston, Texas and Hinsdale, Illinois, the Hindus from Baltimore and suburban New Jersey, the Muslims from Northbrook and Skokie, Illinois. There were also many new traditions represented: American Daoists, representatives of the Covenant of the Goddess and Wicca, the Lyceum of Venus of Healing, and delegates of the native peoples of the Americas—Navajo and Crow, Lakota and Ojibway. The Native American blessing of the four directions formed the liturgical center of the opening ceremonies.

The Chicago Parliament made manifest America's new religious reality. Just as the 1893 Parliament marked the entry into the American mainstream of Jewish and Catholic immigrants, so the 1993 Parliament marked the significant new presence of Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims, and Buddhists who were not visitors to Chicago representing the religious traditions of other places, but Americans representing American religious traditions.

Since that milestone event in 1993, the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions has hosted six more international parliaments in Cape Town, South Africa (1999); Barcelona, Spain (2004); Melbourne, Australia (2009); Salt Lake City, USA (2015); and Toronto, Canada (2018). The Parliament in Melbourne included major speakers, a wide variety of dialogues, panels, and sessions, and a unique mix of arts and service events. Notable attendees included former United States President Jimmy Carter, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Vietnamese Buddhist and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, American Sikh filmmaker Valarie Kaur, Hindu spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Muslim ethicist Tariq Ramadan, Muslim interfaith leader Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, progressive Christian activist Reverend Jim Wallis,

and Faithkeeper of the Onandaga Nation of the Iroquois Confederacy Chief Oren Lyons. The conference schedule was packed with musical and theatre performances, intrareligious and interreligious dialogues, service and volunteer opportunities, multireligious services, youth-oriented sessions, and film screenings.

In addition to hosting the Parliament, the Council organizes several national and international interfaith initiatives. These include “PeaceNext,” a social network for religious and interfaith leaders; an international Ambassador Program in which 120 representatives from 20 countries host parliament events in their own cities and towns; a “Sharing Sacred Spaces” program; a partner cities initiative; and a host of additional webinars and workshops.

Throughout the Council’s history, however, there have been controversies. In 1993, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Chicago withdrew as a co-sponsor of the Parliament because of “the distinctive participation of certain quasi-religious groups with which Orthodox Christians share no common ground.” The letter outlining the rationale for the Church’s decision went on to state that “[i]t would be inconceivable for Orthodox Christians to establish a perceived relationship with groups which profess no belief in God or a Supreme Being. The presence of such groups seems to compromise the integrity of the Parliament’s intended purpose.” Later that year, multiple members of the Buddhist community also lodged a complaint. In an open letter, Buddhists expressed their dismay at hearing “leaders of different religious traditions define all religions as religions of God and unwittingly rank Buddha with God.”

Several years later, some Australians expressed concern at the Council’s selection of Melbourne for 2009’s Parliament, arguing that the country’s significant atheist population makes Melbourne a poor choice for a religious conference: “Australia is one of the least religious countries in the world, with less than 10 per cent [sic] of adults attending regular religious services,” wrote one atheist in an opinion piece published in *The Age* newspaper in 2009. “The fastest growing demographic in this country are those claiming not to be affiliated with any religion,” he reminded readers. As planning for the 2014 Parliament in Brussels took shape, controversial issues such as European Union identity, citizenship, and nationalism found their way into the planning conversations. (The 2014 Parliament was moved to the United States and delayed until 2015 due to the European financial crisis.)

Despite these controversies and recent financial difficulties, the Council continues to look forward, bringing with it over a century of experience promoting interreligious encounter and cooperation, making it an important historic and contemporary voice in the global interfaith efforts.