

ON THE BRIDGE:
Some reflections on the inter-religious journey after the Parliament of the World's Religions

by Jonathan Inkipin

At the end of the formal proceedings, participants at the Melbourne Parliament of the World's Religions were invited to stand together on the bridge outside the Conference centre on the Yarra. This allowed a picture to be taken, with the mixture of religious, cultural and racial backgrounds a striking symbol of the diversity of the spiritualities and unity of humanity present. It also offered a rich metaphor for inter-religious engagement as a whole. For events such as the

Parliament do not only act as bridges between otherwise separate, miscomprehending and sometimes bitterly divided religious groups. The reality is that the best of inter-religious encounter is also directed and sustained by a great river of life and spirit which flows beneath all that bears light and wisdom. Furthermore, in many ways the task of inter-religious endeavour is to build bridges, so that religious peoples can find means to connect, enabling constructive traffic in directions which bring both greater understanding and also much-needed healing to the wider world. So how well did the Melbourne Parliament succeed in this respect and what are the next steps and challenges?



Towards the end of the Parliament, there was a concern voiced in some quarters about what would be its legacy. Partly this was prompted by the desire among some, including government sponsors, that the Parliament should not be a mere 'talking-shop'. I find myself unable to offer much of an assessment but I do have a sense that such a concern is a little misplaced. After all, the Parliament of the World's religions is exactly that: namely a (safe) place for people to meet and talk (or 'parley', to use the nearest English equivalent to the French word 'parler' from which Parliament derives). The effects of such a meeting and talking-place are not, and cannot, be simply calibrated. The organising body, the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, has offered up a new means to continue the conversation, through the creation of PeaceNext, a worldwide inter-religious social network (check it out and register at PeaceNext.org). Other immediate responses may also be traceable, whether in the lives of individuals or groups who attended or through networks and initiatives which have now emerged. Yet, like Christian mission, the inter-religious journey is never one event, or even a series of events (important though these may be). It is much more truly a process. In which respect, it will be the growth of understanding and relationships which will count as we travel onwards, not least the developments of relationships through such events as we held in Sydney and other places last year, rather than the Melbourne extravaganza alone. Let me however offer the following four

questions as relevant to our further bridge-building, each of which draw upon particular encounters of my own during the Melbourne Parliament.

1. With what designs can we best build the bridge?

As in ecumenical life, in inter-religious encounter it is often when we come across points of conflict that we touch fraught edges which may become growing places if we can learn to appreciate and work through them sensitively. Within inter-religious life this is particularly present when we come to talk about the possibilities and difficulties of prayer and/or worship alongside or together with one another. One of the liveliest exchanges at the Parliament thus took place in one workshop between two representatives of Interfaith Ministry (including Australia's own Stephanie Dowrick) and others representing mainstream religious traditions. For it is the case that for Interfaith ministers, and for some others (including some 'progressive' Christians) there is frustration at the unwillingness of others to move into a new future of religion in which, it is held, all the wisdom of the world's religions can, and should, be shared and owned together. Is this really possible to do with integrity however? We are now in a situation where Australian societal recognition of different religious pathways is growing, and, in some areas rightly so – no event, like the memorial service for the Victorian bushfires for instance, can legitimately be limited to Christian religious leadership today. Yet serious scholars of theology



Meditation space with the Tibetan monks at the PWR

and liturgy know that it is in the very particularity of our symbols, language and rituals that we are most deeply formed in our spiritual identity and grow in religious truth. As we handle the challenges of pluralism therefore, what shape do we give to the bridge of relationship in this and other contentious areas (how we honour different religious law and customs being another pressing concern)? There are no simple answers. Yet I found profoundly moving the number of opportunities at the Parliament to hear from those who have been engaged in monastic inter-religious dialogue (such as the Sancta Sophia Meditation Community in Victoria,

and the Christian-Buddhist dialogue of monks which has been taking place across the world and in association with Thomas Merton's former monastery in the USA). Such encounter 'in the cave of the heart' offers another way to build a bridge of profound mystery.

2. How can we engage with the less 'obvious suspects'?

I have always found churches profoundly depressing where members spend time bewailing their, perceived, lack of numbers or age, or racial, or other demographic composition. To some extent it is better to work on the basis that God calls those whom s/he needs and gives us the fellow disciples we need (though not necessarily those whom we would like!). Similarly, concern within inter-religious circles about the limitations of those involved can also become self-defeating and lacking in affirmation of those who are already travelling together. Yet there is undoubtedly a real challenge to those involved in inter-religious encounter to engage with those other than the 'usual suspects' who are drawn to occasions such as the Parliament of the World's Religions. At the events this year in both Sydney and Melbourne, it was a delight to meet with

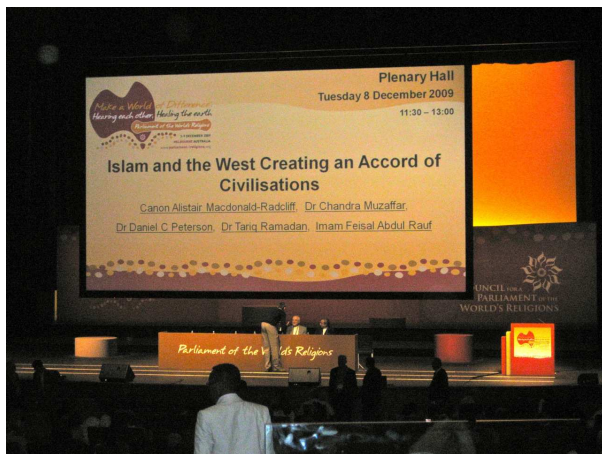
others, such as Jains and Sikhs, who are part of long-lasting mainstream religious traditions but who are not always prominent in our society's awareness. Generally I also feel that the Parliament did well in its Indigenous involvement, although it was disappointing that the Australian Indigenous contributions were largely kept apart from other Indigenous workshops and presentations. Yet, leaving aside the numbers of young people engaged (something which we have worked hard on in Sydney), it remains true to say that the bridge does not yet connect with some vital sections of our global community. Above all this is the case with a huge proportion of the world's Christians and Muslims who form over 50% of the religious population of the globe. Rightly in many ways the Parliament celebrates the hundreds of different religions present within it, yet this same indiscriminate approach also mitigates against the presence of many others (not least Orthodox Christians) who question whether, for example, a newly-constructed European pagan tradition with a small number of adherents should really be given as much airtime as others with wide memberships and long-established sophisticated patterns of truth-seeking and spiritual life. The absences on the inter-religious bridge thus deserve attention. This makes the work of *intra*-religious and ecumenical dialogue (within our religious traditions as well as between them) ever more crucial.



Three of the Sydney youth participants at the conference (Vi from Mitra Buddhist Youth, James from the Uniting Church & Cat from the Anglican Church) with Penny Jones

3. *Can we share the darkness of our own lives and traditions?*

A healthy dialogue in any relationship is also one in which we are able to admit our limitations and blind spots as well as those things which give us and others strength and for which we may



truly praise God. Even if this is uncomfortable, it allows space for us to be real with one another and to grow in mutual wisdom. Honesty and humility are vital. In this regard, it was very good that key flashpoints in the world were not avoided and also that the Parliament made space for an excellent session in which a lively panel of lesbian and gay speakers shared some of their wisdom, pain and humour – to a packed room which would have had people hanging from the chandeliers if there had been any! Former Justice Michael Kirby also spoke cogently in another session, with Dorothy McRae-McMahon, on the use and abuse of sacred text in relation to sexuality. Above all however, I treasured a wonderful morning session in which four women (one Jewish, two Muslim and one Buddhist) talked powerfully about the 'Addressing the Shadow in our own traditions'. It was deeply moving to hear their reflections on the distortions, corruption and oppression with which all our religious traditions can give collude or can give birth to. There

was also a profound sense in which together we can give solidarity and strength to one another. In doing so, we also encourage one another to share the positive sense of ‘darkness’ in each of the great religious traditions: where, as the mystics have it, we discover things in the ‘light of the night’ which we would never discover in the obscuring or burning bright light of day.

4. Where do we find a common purpose?

That inter-religious engagement has very constructive outcomes was also borne out at the Parliament where the themes of shared service, care for and challenge to the world were prominent. Not surprisingly, in view of the almost co-terminous Copenhagen Climate Change



Participants adding their own contributions to the messages of goodwill and petition to the Copenhagen climate summit

conference, environment issues were well to the fore, with Australians such as Miriam Pepper playing leading roles. Of all the contributions in Melbourne it was one on the first evening however which made the most personal impact upon me. The Parliament provided a cornucopia of input and discussion, including the opportunity to hear firsthand from inspiring spiritual guides such as Fr.Laurence Freeman (of the John Main Christian Meditation movement), Sr.Joan Chittister, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Hugh Evans, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann and the Dalai Lama among others. Yet, of all the extraordinary range of people from across the

world whom I met or to whom I listened, Dr.Sakena Yacobi will probably be the person whom I will remember most. Speaking at the opening plenary evening, after a plethora of political and civic and organising worthies had had their appropriate moments, she took centre stage in her simple black robe and hijab, bringing us down to earth about the realities of life, not least for women and children, in war, poverty and ideology-torn Afghanistan. The founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning, Dr.Yacobi with other women has broken new ground in empowering girls, women and the disenfranchised across her land. How much more can she, and we, do if we join our hearts and hopes and hands together?

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