

A Report on the 1993 Parliament of World's Religions

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This year marks the centennial of the 1893 Chicago World's Parliament of Religions, the first such event hosting representatives of the major world religions. Importantly, it marks the beginning of interfaith dialogue in the modern world. This year, in the midst of radical changes taking place in the social, political and cultural spheres, the world religions find themselves thrown together in an increasingly multicultural and multireligious situation. Confronted with the diversity and conflict among religions, people are earnestly seeking for unity and cooperation among them. Indeed, there is no better time than now for world religions to reflect on their current situation and to develop a vision of religion for the century to come.

The 1993 Parliament of World's Religions took place at two places consecutively, Bangalore in south India from August 19 to 22, and in Chicago from August 28 to September 5. In Bangalore, some six hundred people attended from over thirty countries, representing over fifty different religious traditions. In the opening ceremony, religious leaders of various religions sat together on stage. Each in the traditional raiments of their faith, they made a spectacular sight, as they offered prayers and hymns one after another. From Japan the Konkōkyō offered prayers and Risshō Kōsei-kai chanted sutras.

The conference was divided into three programs. Program I was "Perspectives of Interfaith in the Twenty-first Century," Program II "Visiting Program of Religious Centers and Ashrams in the Bangalore Area," and Program III "Religious Resources for Understanding and Cooperation." Each program included several workshops. For instance, Program III contained such workshops as Repentance and Reconciliation, Religion and Peace, The Survival of the Planet, The Role of Religious Traditions in Rebuilding Communities, and Interreligious Relations in the Future—My Vision. I took part in Program III, joining the latter workshop, where such models as Inclusivism, Universalism and Pluralism were discussed as the future model for interfaith

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work. At the workshop I presented a paper entitled "A Positionless Position: A Vision of Interreligious Relations in the Coming Millennium."

Inspired by Nagarjuna's notion of Sunyata, I took the stance of negating both the affirmation and the negation of a common denominator or common essence for world religions and rejected all presuppositions thereof. Briefly, if we realize there is "no-common denominator" or "no-common essence" among any of the religious traditions, by thoroughly overcoming both the affirmative view of the presence of a common denominator and the negative view of its absence, then a boundless openness reveals itself. This I called "positionless position." The clear and complete realization of "no-common denominator," or the "no-common essence" for all world religions, will serve as the *common* basis for realizing the pluralistic situation of world religions. On the basis of this positionless position, each religion is fully realized in the distinctiveness and yet is critically judged by the other religions, as well as by itself, in the encounter with other religions.¹

Questions from the audience centered around the difference between the negative view of common denominator of world religions and the positionless position which I proposed. It was my impression that my suggestion was accepted as a challenge by most of the audience.

The Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago was bigger yet in scale. The participants, numbering over four thousand, hailed from a wide range of religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, and Shinto, as well as Native American and African religions. Programs continued from morning to evening during the nine day Parliament, and were filled with meditation, plenary presentations, workshops, seminars. At some of the plenary sessions, participants addressed critical issues of the modern world, and sought fresh approaches to problems of vital concern, such as poverty, racism, ecology, and world peace. In the face of worldwide tension and violence, much of it religiously influenced, each of the participants was urged to respond to the issues from the depths of their faith.

One significant achievement of the Parliament was "A Global Ethics" by the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, arrived at after four days of serious discussion toward the end of the Parliament, which declared:

"We are interdependent. Each of us depends on the well-being of the whole, and so we have to have respect for the community of living beings, for people, animals, and plants, and for preservation of the Earth, the air, water and soil. . . . We take individual responsibility for all we do. All our discus-

¹ See "A Positionless Position," in *World Faiths Encounter*, No. 6, November 1993, pp. 68-69.

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sions, actions, and failures to act have consequences. . . . We commit ourselves to a culture of non-violence, respect, justice and peace. We shall not oppress, injure, torture, or kill other human beings, forsaking violence as a means of settling differences. . . .

“The Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed first. We pledge to increase our awareness by disciplining our minds, by meditation, by prayer, or by positive thinking. Without risk and a readiness to sacrifice, there can be no fundamental change in our situation. Therefore we commit ourselves to this global ethic to understanding one another, and to socially-beneficial, peace-fostering, and nature-friendly ways of life.”

The closing plenary session included the address of H. H. The Dalai Lama, The Calls to Action, The Proclamation of a Declaration of Global Ethics and A Blessing on the 21st Century.

In this diverse program of the Parliament I made three presentations. First, I joined a panel discussion on “‘Our Religions’ in a Religiously Plural World” where I clarified how the dialogue with Christianity made an impact on my self-understanding as a Buddhist. Secondly, I participated in “Buddhist/Christian Monastic Dialogue” and delivered a paper on “Kenosis and Sunyata.” Thirdly, as my major presentation at the 1993 Parliament, I presented a paper entitled “Two Types of Unity and Religious Pluralism.”

In the presentation I emphasized that in our time, when not only the legitimacy of a particular religion, such as Christianity, Buddhism or Islam, but the legitimacy of religion as such is being seriously questioned, not only mutual understanding, but also mutual transformation of world religions is absolutely necessary. Thus in my presentation I discussed three issues: monotheistic God and the realization of Nichts (Nothingness); two types of unity or oneness; and the notion of justice and wisdom in religion.

In the following pages we will present the entire text of my latter paper, as well as a response by Donald W. Mitchell.