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The Parliament of the World's Religions, who goes and why? An empirical study of Barcelona

2004

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Summary

The Parliament of the World's Religions met in 1993 (Chicago), 1999 (Cape Town) and 2004 (Barcelona) with estimated attendance of between 5,000 and 8,000 participants. The 1993 declaration affirmed that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of religion that provide the condition for a sustainable world order. The present study provides the first detailed profile of the religious background, beliefs, and motivations of participants at the Parliament, drawing on data provided by 658 individuals who attended Barcelona 2004. These data profile a group of people committed both to their own religious and spiritual practices and open to engagement with the religious and spiritual practices of others. In such a context religious diversity functions as the generator of peace, not of conflict.

Introduction

The role of religion within individual human lives and within human societies is both complex and paradoxical. Wellman and Tokuno (2004: 291) captured the paradox succinctly: 'Religion brings war. Religion brings peace.' Religion generates passionate commitment, and passionate commitment even to tolerance can give rise to intolerance, passionate commitment even to peace can give rise to violence. Within one religious tradition there are often internal divisions. Christianity is divided between the worldviews of the Catholics, the Orthodox and the Reformed traditions. Within Christianity the path of ecumenism is hard and the changing landscape of the theology of religions (how one religion understands the others) is hazardous and perilous. Even within a single strand of the Christian tradition like Anglicanism the faultlines are deep and precarious (Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005). The dialogue between religions, the inter-faith conversation is even more fraught.

Within this context, the Parliament of the World's Religions offers an interesting case study of the attempt to harness the insights and energy of the religions of the world as a tool for global peace and harmony. The first Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Chicago in 1893, and its centenial was marked by another Parliament in Chicago in 1993 (Seager, 1996). Subsequent parliaments were held in 1999 (Cape Town, South Africa), and in 2004 (Barcelona, Spain) and in 2009 (Melbourne, Australia). According to the 1993 Executive Summary, that Parliament was attended by around 5,500 individuals representing a total of 55 nations and around 60 religions (Parliament, 1993a).

The ethos of the Parliament is summed up in two documents that emerged from the 1993 and 1999 meetings: *Toward a global ethic* (an initial declaration) (Parliament, 1993b) and *A call to our Guiding Institutions* (Parliament, 1999). The 1993 document made the following claim.

We affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of religions, and

that these form the basis of a global ethic…. There already exist ancient guidelines for

human behaviour which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and

which are the condition for a sustainable world order. (Parliament, 1993b: 2)

The 1993 document proceeded to identify four 'irrevocable directives' that emerge from

'most' of the world's religions:

Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life; commitment to a culture of

solidarity and a just economic order; commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of

truthfulness; commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and

women. (Parliament, 1993b: 8)

Following the Chicago Parliament of 1993, Teasdale and Cairns (1996) edited a

collection of essays that provide a valuable record of that event, containing major addresses and

reflections as well as short evocations of the spirit of the Parliament. In the opening chapter, His

Holiness the Dalai Lama, XIV, one of the 24 presidents of the Parliament's Assembly, offered

the following aspiration.

The Parliament of the World's Religions encourages us to meet in an atmosphere of

mutual respect to exchange our experiences and learn from each other. It is my prayer

that by doing so we shall all contribute to a genuinely more peaceful and amicable world.

(p 21)

In the closing chapter, George Cairns, one of the editors and a professor of the Chicago

Theological Seminary, gave his personal assessment of what had been achieved.

For me, the Parliament was an event that was a catalyst, a coming together of many

networks and resonating networks in ways never experienced before. It was an event of

global singularity. (p 236)

In one of the few social scientific commentaries on the Parliament of the World's Religions, Block (2008) identifies that both the religious agenda and the political agenda 'were often perceived as extremely liberal in orientation' (p. 614). Following his review of a number of published or web-based comments on the Parliament, Block drew the following conclusion:

Fundamentalist Christians as well as Muslims have picketed all the Parliaments for allegedly being a blasphemous event that honoured secular humanisms and self-preoccupation over obedience to God. The Parliament's polytheistic orientation, its inclusion of Paganism, sessions on self-improvement, and what was perceived to be a highly liberal political agenda, were points of contention raised by religious conservatives. (Block, 2008: 614)

While the public documentation makes clear the aspirations of the Council, what is not known is the views of the individuals who actually attend the Parliament. The aim of the present study was to address this gap in knowledge by inviting participants at Barcelona who visited the table of the International Interfaith Centre in the convention lobby or the exhibition hall to complete a detailed questionnaire.

Method

Procedure

The substantial questionnaire was distributed to participants attending the 2004 convention of the Parliament of the World's Religions convened in Barcelona by representatives of the International Interfaith Centre at Oxford (IIC). Participants were assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity, and invited to approach the team at the IIC table in the exhibition hall if they had questions about the project. Those who returned completed questionnaires to the

IIC table received a free rucksack. A total of 658 thoroughly completed questionnaires were

returned.

Sample

The 658 respondents comprised: 249 men, 398 women and 11 individuals of undisclosed

sex; 36 individuals under the age of twenty, 114 in their twenties, 69 in their thirties, 110 in their

forties, 162 in their fifties, 127 in their sixties, 35 aged seventy or over, and 5 of undisclosed age.

Of the ten religious traditions listed in the questionnaire, 313 individuals self-identified as

Christians, 43 as Hindus, 38 as Buddhists, 27 as Muslims, 24 as Sikhs, 23 as Pagans, 22 as

Baha'is, 19 as Jews, 7 as Jains, and 6 as Zoroastrians. Over half of the participants in the survey

came from the USA (353), with the next largest group coming from Spain, the host nation (80),

UK (47), and Canada (38). The remaining participants identified a total of 51 other countries. A

third of the participants (219) identified themselves as 'a recognised leader of a religious or

spiritual community' from across a very wide range of traditions.

Instrument

The main body of the questionnaire comprised a series of 119 items arranged for

assessment on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, disagree

strongly. The items were designed to cover a number of topics from which nine have been

selected for discussion in this paper: 1) motivation for attending the Parliament (8 items); 2)

views on God and on the Ultimate Real (11 items); 3) understandings of religion and spirituality

(6 items); 4) beliefs about life after death (8 items), 5) sources of knowledge about God (10

items); 6) views on truth (3 items); 7) personal commitment (8 items); 8) interfaith engagement

(5 items); and the relationship between religion and ethics and morality (5 items).

Analysis

The following analysis is designed to provide a straight forward overview of the responses of the 658 people who completed the questionnaire. In these tables agree strongly and agree responses have been collapsed into the category 'yes', and disagree strongly and disagree responses have been collapsed into the category 'no'.

Results and discussion

Motivation for attending the Parliament

The items displayed in table 1 make it clear that the great majority of participants came to the Parliament with an open and enquiring quest to engage with individuals from other religious and spiritual backgrounds. They had come to learn about other religious/spiritual traditions (94%), to learn about the religious/spiritual traditions of others (92%), and to engage in dialogue with others of different traditions/practices (90%). The majority of participants were committed to the ethos of the Parliament in harnessing the wisdom of the world's religions for the benefit of humankind. They had come to explore the contributions that other religions/spiritualities can make toward a better world (90%).

While the first priority of the participants was that of listening too others, the majority had come with a willingness to explore the richness of their own tradition within the context of the Parliament. They had come to engage in dialogue with others of their own tradition/practice (57%) and to explore the contribution that their own religion/spirituality can make toward a better world (80%). Two thirds had come to the Parliament with a commitment to share their own religious/spiritual identity with others (64%). A quarter had come with the more didactic intention of teaching others about their own religious/spiritual tradition (25%).

God and the Ultimate Reality

Behind the common motivation to learn from the religious and spiritual traditions of the

world, participants at the Parliament bring with them a wide range of understandings of what

underpins their own personal religion or spiritual beliefs (Table 2). The majority (80%) are

comfortable using the word 'God' of their own position, but 12% reject the word and 8% are

ambivalent about it. As part of the quest for a language of inclusivity 75% speak of belief in a

Universal Truth, 75% speak of belief in Enlightenment, and 71% speak of belief in an all-

pervading Goodness.

The majority of the participants speak in terms of a unitary power: 74% believe that there

is only one God, and 69% believe that there is one spirit guiding the universe. Alongside this

majority view, there is a significant minority who do not agree: 25% believe there are many

spirits guiding the universe, and 21% believe there are many gods.

The debate between the personal and the impersonal is clearly alive among the

participants: while 49% believe there is one personal God and 24% believe there are many

personal Gods, 46% believe God is an impersonal force or spirit.

Religion and spirituality

Just as the word 'God' can be problematic in some discourse relevant to the participants

at the Parliament, so can the word 'religion' itself be problematic. As table 3 demonstrates, some

of the participants prefer the description 'religious', some prefer the description 'spiritual', and

others are happy with both terms. Thus, 78% describe themselves as a spiritual person and 67%

describe themselves as a religious person, indicating considerable overlap between the two

constructs. Similarly, 70% say that they prefer to use the term 'spiritual' to describe their beliefs,

and 46% say that they prefer to use the term 'religious' to describe their beliefs, again indicating

considerable over lap between the two constructs.

Moreover, the term 'spirituality' was less likely to have negative connotations among

participants at the Parliament. While 28% disliked the term 'religion', the proportion fell to 10% who disliked the term 'spirituality'.

Life and death

Central to the teachings of many religious and spiritual traditions are notions about the sanctity of life and about the human destiny after death. Just as beliefs about God and the Ultimate Reality divide as much as unite religious and spiritual traditions, so do beliefs about the human destiny after death. Table 4 demonstrates that only a minority of the participants at the Parliament believe that life ends at death (17%), but then there is a diversity of ways in which belief in the continuation of life is expressed: 72% believe in the immortality of the soul; 68% believe in eternal life; 38% believe in reincarnation; and 33% believe in the resurrection of the body.

In terms of the wider religious vocabulary that describes the style and quality of life beyond the grave, 52% believe in heaven, 28% believe in hell, and 12% believe in purgatory.

Knowledge about God

The ethos of the Parliament is concerned with the complementarity of the religious and spiritual traditions of the world. Table 5 makes it clear that the great majority of the participants are convinced by this agenda: 96% maintain that it is important to learn about other religious/spiritual traditions; 96% feel that it is important to interact with people from religious/spiritual traditions other than their own; and 92% believe that many religious/spiritual traditions have valuable knowledge about God. Examined from a slightly different perspective, 86% believe that God reveals truth in more than one religious/spiritual tradition; 84% believe that many religious/spiritual traditions can lead people to union with God; and 74% believe that knowledge about God should be sought through many religious/spiritual traditions.

There are, however, a minority of participants at the Parliament who do not pursue this inclusivist agenda: 8% take the view that their own religious/spiritual tradition is the only true source for knowledge about God, and the same proportion (8%) maintain that other religious/spiritual traditions are inferior to their own. While these more extreme exlusivist views are espoused by less than one in ten of the participants at the Parliament, the proportion expands to nearly two in ten who claim that their religious/spiritual tradition is the ultimate source for knowledge about God (17%), and to nearly three in ten who claim that knowledge of God is most fully achieved through their own religious/spiritual tradition (27%).

Views on truth

Another means for examining the approaches to religious inclusivity and religious exclusivity of the participants at the Parliament is provided by exploring their views on Truth and Enlightenment. Table 6 demonstrates that the majority of the participants take the inclusivist view that many religious/spiritual traditions have valuable knowledge of Truth/Enlightenment (92%) and that many religious/spiritual traditions can lead people to Truth/Enlightenment (88%).

On the other hand, a significant minority of the participants take the exclusivist view that their own religious/spiritual tradition is the only true source for Truth/Enlightenment (15%). Clearly some of those who are committed to seeing their own tradition as the only 'true' source for Truth/Enlightenment nonetheless remain open to respecting the 'valuable knowledge' offered by other traditions.

Personal commitment

The majority of individuals who attend the Parliament do so on the basis of being themselves committed to religious or spiritual practices. Table 7 demonstrates that for four out of every five participants praying (80%) and meditating (78%) are important in their lives. Smaller

numbers identify chanting (35%) and fasting (29%) as important in their lives.

Over two-thirds of the participants claim to have a personal path of truth (72%) and to have a close personal relationship with God (68%). Over two-thirds of the participants say that they believe the teachings of their religious/spiritual tradition (69%) and that they practise the rituals of their religious/spiritual tradition. Clearly the majority of those attending the Parliament come not as spectators of the religious and spiritual landscape but as active participants within religious and spiritual traditions.

Interfaith engagement

Although the majority of those who come to the Parliament are firmly rooted within their own religious/spiritual tradition, table 8 confirms their commitment to being with, sharing with and learning from the religious and spirituality traditions of others. All most all the participants say that they value conversations about religion/spirituality with people from other traditions (96%) and that knowledge of more than one religious/spiri9tual tradition enhances their own spirituality (95%). The majority of the participants say that they are comfortable praying (chanting, meditating, etc) alongside people form other religious/spiritual traditions.

This process of learning from a range of religious/spiritual traditions has resulted in 62% of the participants saying that they engage in practise from more than one religious/spiritual tradition. One the other hand, it remains important for one in every five participants to the Parliament (18%) not to practise outside their own religious/spiritual tradition.

Ethics and morality

Historically there has been a long association between religion and moral or ethical teachings, especially in the areas of sexuality and diet. This link remains among some of the participants at the Parliament, although table 9 makes it clear that the link is not particularly

strong.

The strongest link between religion and ethics remains in the field of abortion, with 23% of the participants claiming that they are against abortion because their religious/spiritual tradition teaches that it is wrong. Then in descending order the link is with drinking alcohol (18%), with homosexuality (13%), with eating meat (12%), and with the use of birth control (6%). The liberalising agenda that erodes traditional links between religion and behaviour has by no means eradicated these links completely.

Conclusion

The present study set out to listen to a sample of the participants attending the Parliament of the World's Religions convened in Barcelona in 2004. A total of 658 participants accepted the invitation extended by the International Interfaith Centre to complete a detailed survey. Information has been extracted from this survey to address nine main questions.

Question one concerned motivation for attending the Parliament. The data demonstrated a strong commitment to engage in dialogue with others of different traditions/practices and to explore the contributions that other religions/spiritualities can make toward a better world.

Question two concerned assessing the range of views held by participants on the idea of God and of the Ultimate Reality. The data demonstrated that the majority of participants were comfortable using the word 'God' when describing their religious/spiritual beliefs, but that concepts like Enlightenment and Universal Truth were also deemed helpful by the majority of participants.

Question three focused on the distinction between the notions of religion and spirituality. The data demonstrated that a greater number of participants were comfortable with the language of spirituality than with the language of religion.

Question four focused on beliefs about life and death. The data demonstrated that the majority of participants believed that death was not the end, although there was a variety of belief concerning the after-life.

Question five examined how the participants viewed the sources of religious knowledge. The data demonstrated that the majority of participants valued the perspective that could come from listening to a number of traditions. Only a small minority saw their own traditions as providing an exclusive path to God.

Question six built on question five and examined in greater depth the conflicting positions of inclusivism and exclusivism. The data demonstrated that the majority of participants take the inclusivist view that many religious/spiritual traditions can lead people to Truth or to Enlightenment.

Question seven examined the personal religious commitment of the participants. The data demonstrated that the majority of participants were rooted within their own religious or spiritual tradition and were committed to maintaining their personal religious practices.

Question eight examined the personal interfaith engagement of the participants. The data demonstrated that the majority of participants' were committed to and had benefited from conversation with other traditions.

Question nine examined the extent to which the participants' religious and spiritual tradition shaped their views on areas like abortion, homosexuality, and alcohol consumption. The data demonstrated that such links existed only for a minority of participants.

Overall the vision of the initial declaration from Chicago 1993 (Parliament, 1993b) seems to have been achieved among those who travelled to Barcelona in 2004. Here is a group of people from diverse national, cultural and religious backgrounds committed to exploring the

benefits for a sustainable world order to be derived from a sympathetic, informed and

enlightened dialogue between the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of the world. Given

the enormous potential within religions for generating hatred, conflict and war as much as for

generating love, reconciliation and peace, the creative model established by the Parliament for

the World's Religions is worth supporting and developing on the local level as well as on the

international platform.

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Table 1

Motivation for attending the Parliament

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
I came to Parliament to teach others about my religious /spiritual tradition	25	13	62
I came to Parliament to learn about other religious/ spiritual traditions	94	4	3
I came to the Parliament to share my religious/ spiritual identity	64	17	19
I came to the Parliament to learn about the religious/ spiritual identity of others	92	5	3
I came to the Parliament to engage in dialogue with others of my tradition/practice	57	18	25
I came to the Parliament to engage in dialogue with others of different traditions/practices	90	7	3
I came to the Parliament to explore the contribution my religion/spirituality can make towards a better world	80	11	9
I came to the Parliament to explore the contribution that other religions/spiritualities can make toward a better world	90	7	3

_____

Table 2

Views on God and on the Ultimate Real

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
I am comfortable using the word 'God' when describing my religious/ spiritual beliefs	80	8	12
I believe there is only one God	74	13	13
I believe there are many gods	21	21	58
I believe there is one personal God	49	26	23
I believe there are many personal gods	24	25	50
I believe God is an impersonal force or spirit	46	20	34
I believe there is one spirit guiding the universe	69	17	13
I believe there are many spirits guiding the universe	25	31	44
I believe in an all pervading Goodness	71	18	11
I believe in Enlightenment	75	17	8
I believe in a Universal Truth	75	18	8

Table 3

Religion and spirituality

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
I prefer to use the term 'religion' to describe my beliefs	46	16	38
I dislike the term 'religion'	28	23	49
I prefer to use the term 'spirituality' to describe my Beliefs	70	15	15
I dislike the term 'spirituality'	10	15	75
I am a religious person	67	17	16
I am a spiritual person	78	9	3

_____

Table 4

Beliefs about life and death

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
I believe in reincarnation	38	24	37
I believe in eternal life	68	18	13
I believe in the resurrection of the body	33	26	41
I believe in the immortality of the soul	72	16	12
I believe life ends at death	17	15	69
I believe in heaven	52	23	25
I believe in hell	28	23	49
I believe in purgatory	12	28	35

_____

Table 5

Knowledge about God

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
It is important to learn about other religious/spiritual traditions	96	3	1
I feel it is important to interact with people from religious/spiritual traditions other than my own	96	3	1
Many religious/spiritual traditions have valuable knowledge about God	92	7	1
God reveals truth in more than one religious/spiritual tradition	86	11	4
Many religious/spiritual traditions can lead people to union with God	84	11	5
Knowledge about God should be sought through many religious/spiritual traditions	74	19	7
My religious/spiritual tradition is the only true source for knowledge about God	8	11	81
Other religious/spiritual traditions are inferior to my own	8	11	81
My religious/spiritual tradition is the ultimate source for Knowledge about God	17	13	70
Knowledge of God is most fully achieved through my religious/spiritual tradition	27	23	51

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Table 6

Views on truth

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
My religious/spiritual tradition is the only true source for Truth/Enlightenment	15	11	74
Many religious/spiritual traditions can lead people to Truth/Enlightenment	88	7	5
Many religious/spiritual traditions have valuable knowledge of Truth/Enlightenment	92	5	3

Table 7

Personal commitment

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
Praying is important in my life	80	9	11
Meditating is important in my life	78	13	9
Chanting is important in my life	35	21	44
Fasting is important in my life	29	22	49
I have a personal path of truth	72	19	9
I have a close personal relationship with God	68	19	13
I believe the teachings of my religious/spiritual tradition	69	20	11
I practise the rituals of my religious/spiritual tradition	68	16	16

Table 8

Interfaith engagement

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
I value conversations about religion/spirituality with people from other traditions	96	3	1
Knowledge of more than one religious/spiritual tradition enhances my own spirituality	95	4	1
I am comfortable praying (chanting, meditating, etc) alongside people from other religious/spiritual traditions	86	9	5
I engage in practices from more than one religious/ spiritual tradition	62	12	26
It is important for me not to practise outside my religious/spiritual tradition	18	13	70

_____

Table 9

Ethics and morality

_____

	yes %	? %	no %
I am against abortion because my religious/spiritual tradition teaches it is wrong	23	12	65
I do not drink alcohol because my religious/spiritual tradition teaches it is wrong	18	8	74
I am against homosexuality because my religious/spiritual Tradition teaches it is wrong	13	11	77
I do not eat meat because my religious/spiritual tradition teaches it is wrong	12	7	81
I am against the use of birth control because my religious /spiritual tradition teaches it is wrong	6	10	84

_____