Learnings for the Future of Inter-Faith Dialogue

Part I :
Questions arising from the Parliament of the World's Religions

(Chicago, 1993)

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O Lord, Forgive us for having left undone those things which we ought to have done and for having done those things which we ought not to have done.

A Introduction

The Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Chicago (29 August-4th September 1993) - as a centennial celebration of a similar event in Chicago in 1893. This came to be seen by many as the birth of the inter-faith movement despite its origins as an official extension of an event organized by the City of Chicago to commemorate the Fourth Centenary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas. This centennial was also marked by other inter-faith events elsewhere.

This note follows an earlier report on learnings of relevance to inter-faith gatherings (1) which includes a description of the World Congress towards Spiritual Concord (Alma Ata, 1992) already reproduced in this journal (2). It is designed to highlight some of the learnings to be gained from these events with a view to any future initiatives of this kind. As such it is less an evaluation of what was achieved and more an assessment of the questions and challenges still to be faced.

Figure 1 :
International inter-faith bodies

- International Association for Religious Freedom (founded 1900)
- World Congress of Faiths (1936)
- Temple of Understanding (1960)
- World Conference on Religion and Peace (1970)
- International Interfaith Organizations Coordinating Committee (1991 as an ad hoc grouping of the above until the end of 1993)
- Association International Meetings: People and Religions (1986)
- Inter Religious Federation for World Peace (1990, by Reverend Moon)
- World Fellowship of Inter-Religious Councils

' Union of International **Associations.**

One dilemma in formulating this note is the nature of its potential readership. It is not designed for those whose interest is primarily in celebrating what has been achieved, nor is it especially concerned with any particular institutional setting through which future inter-faith events may emerge. The aim is to highlight concerns which merit attention if such events are to respond more effectively to the challenge of the times and the expectations projected onto them by many around the world.

There is a widespread tendency to emphasize the oneness at the heart of all religions, the harmony of world community, and the need for consensus. This "positive" approach has not reversed the trend towards religious violence. A contrasting approach is therefore explored here in accordance with the Dalai Lama's view that to talk of the oneness at the heart of religions is "hypocrisy". In Chicago he stressed the value and necessity of differences as serving the needs of people of different temperament. From this perspective the objective is not to make religions similar, but to learn to work creatively and effectively with those differences.

B. Background

There is a long history of inter-faith dialogues. But "inter-faith" has always been interpreted in different ways, grouping a larger or smaller number of religious traditions. Many have arisen from the initiative of a particular group and have been limited in scope to the bilateral relationship with some other religious tradition (eg Christians-Jews). There is no "map" of the overlap or isolation of different inter-faith initiatives. Nor does this appear to be a concern.

There are a number of international inter-faith organizations, beyond those which are primarily inter-denominational within traditions such as Christianity. The broadest Christian inter-denominational body is the World Council of Churches, but this does not include either Roman Catholics nor the more fundamentalist Christians grouped within the International Council of Christian Churches. The main international inter-faith bodies are indicated in Figure 1. The main international inter-faith events during the 1992-93 centennial period are indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2:
International inter-faith centennial events

- People and Religions (Louvain-Brussels, 1992; Milan, September 1993). This annual event, grouping some 1,000 people, is essentially an initiative of the Community of S. Egidio of the Roman Catholic Church which effectively determines the programme and the pattern of invitations.

- First World Congress towards Spiritual Concord (Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, 1992) organized by the International Association "Peace through Culture" (Moscow) and bringing together a total of some 3,000 people.

- Delhi Congress of the Inter Religious Federation for World Peace (New Delhi, 1-7 February 1993), bringing together some 600 participants.

- Third General Assembly of the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders (Kyoto, 17-23 April 1993).

- Interfaith World Celebration of Unity and Life of the World Fellowship of Inter-Religious Councils (Kanyakumari, India, August 1993} bringing together 360 participants.

- Sarva-Dharma-Sammelana (Bangalore, 18-22 August 1993) organized by the International Inter-faith Organizations Coordinating Committee) as a gathering of 600 people from actively engaged in inter-faith work in 28 countries.

- Parliament of the World's Religions (Chicago, September 1993) organized by the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions. This originated as the initiative of a Chicago group of Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus and Zoroastrians, later joined by Christians and others.

It is characteristic of "inter-faith politics" that these events are not functionally related to each other, although representatives of one may occasionally be consulted on the organization of another. Very few participants at one event attend any of the others, if only for financial reasons.

Few speakers at any one event will be aware of, or refer to, the other events. Whilst all may acknowledge, to some degree, the centennial period, there will be little concern at the degree of evolution of inter-faith dialogue through this pattern of events. There is no sense of continuity or ongoing work — nor any checklist of challenges and opportunities. Their declarations do not build upon one another. In brief, there is no inter-faith "flame of insight" to be carried on from one to the other.

Many would argue that anyway the focus of interfaith dialogue is on celebrating mutuality rather than clarifying new approaches. Others would argue that the connections are organic and subtle and must necessarily evolve at their own pace — irrespective of the ongoing challenges of inter-religious violence in places such as Bosnia, the Middle East, India, and Northern Ireland.

C. Appearances

Objectives

It continues to be a major achievement to bring together the representatives of different faiths for an international gathering under the same roof. From this perspective, the Chicago Parliament stands as a major symbolic success — and a striking celebration of one hundred years of progress.

A prime objective of such events seems to be to "talk up" the importance of inter-faith dialogue. Distinguished representatives of different faiths are called upon to address this theme from different angles in plenary speeches. Many succeed in devoting considerable time to this process. It arouses little controversy and confirms the credibility of the initiative — above all to the adherents of each faith. This is an opportunity to establish benchmarks. It may well be asked, given the history of inter-faith dialogue, exactly how much time needs to be devoted to this process.

Another prime objective that absorbs considerable attention is the reflection of the consensus of the assembled faiths in some form of declaration. In promoting a *Globdl Ethic,* the underlying intention in Chicago was not theological unity, however, but working toward peace in a world where more than two thirds of armed conflicts have religion at their core. Given the treatment accorded to such declarations by wider society, and by the religions themselves, it may be asked whether producing such documents merits the resources allocated to this process. The fate of the Declaration of Human Responsibilities for Peace Sustainability (Costa Rica, 1989) merits especial attention in this respect. And what of the relationship to the declaration of the United Nations Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, June 1993) that was only "universally agreed" under pressure of political blackmail?

Another objective is to further the process of dialogue between the faiths. This usually takes the form of ensuring discussion between representatives so that some minimal bond of friendship may develop. But beyond cordiality and professional concerns, it remains unclear to what degree real differences are effectively addressed or what it is hoped to create through dialogue.

It needs to be stressed that the Chicago Parliament evolved through a number of visions of greater or lesser ambition which attracted people with different agendas. Some of the objectives were recognized as having come "before their time", as ably noted by Ronald Kidd (3). Financial realities finally dictated that the event be essentially planned as a local Chicago event, especially since all the world religions (and many others) were represented there. Indeed for some the purpose was to improve interfaith relations in Chicago alone. But paradoxically, like its predecessor, it blossomed into an event of world significance, for which many, including the organizers, were essentially unprepared. This resulted in the presence of elements which were contrary to the principles of the initiators of the process which led up to it. The following comments need to be read in the light of this ambiguity. For some it was effectively a "Parliament of the World's Relgions based in Chicago", but for many (including the media) it was treated as a truly international "World Parliament of Religions".

Setting

The initiatives of the Roman Catholic Church tend to be housed in suitably established institutions, whether universities or government buildings. That in Alma Ata was held in the national congress centre under the auspices of the President of Kazakhstan — an extraordinary initiative for the president of a newly-independent and impoverished country in a state of social transition.

In Chicago the event was held partly in the Palmer House Hilton Hotel, a large and gracious building dating from the earlier part of the century. The hotel of 23 floors had approximately 200 rooms per floor, with a number of large meeting rooms and many smaller ones. The core Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders was held in the former Chicago Stock Exchange, now part of the Art Institute. Many participants were also lodged in neighbouring hotels or with community groups.

Again it was, and remains, a symbolic achievement to hold such an event in a city widely perceived as epitomizing the spirit of hardened materialism. Given the size of the meeting, the facilities were well suited to the occasion. The challenge of the dietary and culinary exigencies of the different faiths was also well met by the hotel's many restaurants.

Participants

As in the academic world, one of the key features of international inter-faith conferences is what might be termed "chequebook invitations". For few are able to resist the temptations of long-distance travel with all expenses paid. It is therefore difficult to assess the import of such events when it is unclear what financial commitment the participant made — as contrasted with the organizer, or the local host committees. The emerging inter-faith conference circuit also exerts certain pressures, if further travel is to be forthcoming.

Although "open", participation in the Catholic initiatives tends to be confined to invited non-Catholic participants and numerous Catholics, especially seminarians and members of Catholic communities. Participant lists and breakdowns are unobtainable.

The Alma Ata initiative was also open, with the composition of the 3,000 participants largely determined by the communication networks of the semi-formal religious and spiritual movements in the former Soviet Union and the Central Asian republics. Some 100 Europeans were present, but with almost no participation from North America. An unusual mix of spiritual traditions was represented. But again no participants lists and breakdowns were obtainable.

Chicago was a magnificent success in assembling over 6,000 participants - although many may only have attended for a day or so. Registration had to be closed (under pressure from the local fire department) before the event opened because of the unexpected numbers (nearly double the number expected). The core group of invited "religious and spiritual leaders" numbered less than 200, most of whom gave lectures and workshops to the remainder, although many others were invited to play key roles in such events. Part of the success in ensuring a broad mix of faiths was due to the role played by the Host Committees in the Chicago area organized for each faith. These played a key role in organizing and financing the presence of representatives of religions, notably from Asia. Use of multiple local host committees proved an unusually successful approach to organizing international participation. As was noted, North American is now itself home to a very broad range of non-Christian faiths, many based on spiritual communities. These too were well-represented. But again, no list of participants or breakdowns were available.

It was fairly clear that the Chicago event attracted very few participants from Europe or the Latin countries. Buddhists claimed that there was inadequate participation from Japan. Others noted the absence of Muslim theologians. Since no interpretation facilities were provided, nearly all participants necessarily had a reasonable competence in English. It is unclear, despite the exotic range of costumes, how many participants actually travelled from outside North America — beyond those specifically invited or those whose travel was facilitated from the USA. Nevertheless the range of dress and racial types created the impression of a meeting much more international than most — including those of the United Nations.

Whether the types of people attracted to the event corresponded to those most valuable in advancing the cause of inter-faith dialogue is another matter — although of concern to some participants. The skills and insights of the participants might however be judged irrelevant to the symbolic significance of the event their presence brought about. Who expected whom to achieve what?

Programme structure

The programmes of the Catholic initiatives are relatively simple, as was that of Alma Ata. In the latter case, however, the schedule was merely indicative so that even invited speakers were unclear, up until the last moment, whether in fact they would speak. Programming was a last minute exercise subject to the vagaries of last minute politics — and opportunities — and personal contact with the organizers.

The programme structure of the Chicago event was exceedingly complex. It was made up of over 600 separate events, of which 40 might be occurring in parallel at any one time. Fortunately most events took place within the Palmer Hotel. The programme schedule given to each participant was a closely printed softbound book of some 152 pages in English. Without it, effective participation was virtually impossible. It amounted to a "street map" through which the three-dimensional space-time maze of the event could be navigated by those with such skills. The otherwise excellent programme lacked an index so locating the session in which a given personality would speak required up to an hour of study. No attempt was made to provide an index by theme. Few last minute amendments were made, and if made were virtually impossible to communicate to interested participants.

The 8-day programme was divided into the components indicated in Figure 3. The schedule ran from sunrise (meditation) to the final plenary each evening, starting at 20.00 and running through to 22.00 or 23.00.

The Parliament of the People was a lunchtime facilitated session for (up to 300) participants wanting to take the opportunity to dialogue and articulate their views for presentation to the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. It called upon the services of a team of some 30 facilitators. For several hours a day, these also serviced

347

Figure 3 :
Chicago programme components

Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders (final 3 days)

Open sessions (over 8 days)
Inter-faith celebrations (morning and evening)
Plenary sessions (daily)
Presentations
Major presentations (daily)
Seminars and lectures (daily)
Symposia and workshops
Academic presentations and colloquia (daily)
Science symposium (daily)
Religion and violence (daily)
Business symposium (daily)
Conference on pluralism (daily)
Classes, exercises (daily)
Media panels (final day)

Parliament of the People (4 days at lunchtime)

Festivals, performances and exhibits
Performance series: song, dance, poetry (daily)
Festival of sacred arts
Art exhibit
Video and film festival
Concert (final day)

four "spaces" for: elders, women, men, and a hospitality centre.

In addition to the excellent internal messaging system of the hotel, there were two communication facilities operating during the event:
(a) TogetherNet: a computerized network allowing communication between participants and others, before, during and subsequent to the event. Participants were invited to provide personal data for inclusion, and to subscribe to later use of the service.
(b) Your Voice : a participant interaction messaging system based on 50-word messages supplied by participants whether through "suggestion boxes" or as part of the TogetherNet questionnaire. These messages, comments and questions were typed into notebook computers and printed out as a newsletter of 12 issues. Conclusions of the Parliament of the People and of the Assembly were also incorporated into the final issues of Your Voice (9).

Organization

The Parliament was organized by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions of which the principal organ is the Board of Trustees, numbering 37 people. Practical organization was carried out by Council staff — assisted by a large and well-coordinated group of volunteers. With few exceptions Trustees are based in the USA, and primarily in the Chicago area. The Board was assisted by 14 local Host Committees for the following religious communities: African American, Anglican/Episcopal, Baha'i, Buddhist, Pan Orthodox, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Mus-

lim, Native American, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sikh, and Zoroastrian.

The donors listed in the programme document ranged from those contributing over $100,000 (Laurance Rockefeller, John Templeton), over $25,000 (MacArthur Foundation, Betty Reneker, Steven Rockefeller), to those giving lesser amounts (some 80 bodies and individuals). All seem to be based in the USA.

The legitimacy of the event had been further established by ensuring "co-sponsorship" by some 200 religious bodies and organizations, all but 12 based in North America. The World Council of Churches was a notable absentee.

Operations

The event appeared to function very smoothly. Clearly the infrastructure provided by an experienced convention hotel such as the Palmer House avoided many difficulties. Partly because of the personalities present, the level of security was quite high. Many security personnel patrolled the building throughout the event.

As a "programme driven" event, the main challenges were to ensure that the responsible people and speakers were in the right rooms at the right time. Other difficulties such as document distribution and interpretation were avoided because they were not part of the process.

There was extensive media coverage of the event, especially in North America. A number of video crews were present to establish video archives. There was little provision for recording presentations and it is unclear to what extent there will be a written record of the event. No "papers" were distributed, with the exception of the Sourcebook (4).

Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders

This culminating 3-day event in the nearby former Stock Exchange — a not inappropriate location, for the discussion of values — assembled some 200 personalities (including theologians) with the objective of obtaining their signature of a *Global Ethic.* This had been prepared in advance by the Swiss theologian Dr Hans Küng in consultation with many relevant authorities, including Marcus Braybrooke *(Stepping Stones to a Global Ethic).* Küng had laid the groundwork for such a moral world order in a recent book on *Global Responsibility: in search of a new world ethic* (London, SCM Press, 1991). This called for a paradigm shift towards "a post-confessional and interreligious humanity" in which the major faiths would celebrate their common ethic while exploring their own weaknesses. The *Global Ethic* was described as an alternative framework for religion to which people would be held accountable.

Participants at the Assembly were carefully grouped into tables of approximately eight people, each reflecting an inter-faith mix. Each table included a member of the Board of Trustees as well as one member of the team of facilitators.

Participants at each table were invited to introduce themselves and to dialogue, before turning their attention to the declaration. Over half the Assembly participants signed the declaration, headed by the Dalai Lama.

Coherence

There was little effort to provide any sense of coherence or complementarity to the complex pattern of the event. From this perspective it was a celebration rather than a real effort to progress constructively towards some objective or product. The main product sought was the signature of the *Global Ethic* by the Assembly.

But a remarkable attempt was made to set the context for the event through a 240-page background document : *A Sourcebook for the Community of Religions*, prepared for the Council by Joel Beversluis (4). This could be purchased by participants from the Council and may well prove to be the most important product of the event.

The document contained a highly informative, readable mix of short contributions from a wide range of existing and solicited sources. It was organized as indicated in Figure 4.

Figure 4:
Contents of Chicago "Sourcebook"

The Centennial
• Legacies of the 1893 Parliament
• Religions and critical issues

Portraits of religions of the world (with their views of dialogue)
• Indigenous religions: covering African, Indigenous and Shinto religions
• World religions: covering 11 faiths
• Families, movements and branches: covering the "Christian Family Tree", Swedenborgianism, Theosophy, Unification Church, Unitarian Universalist Church, and Wicca.

Forming a community of religions: perspectives
• Introduction to interfaith cooperation and dialogue
• Guide to major interfaith organizations and centennial events
• Moving toward a global ethic: other initiatives
• Prayers and reflections from different religions

Looking toward the 21st Century
• New voices
• Warnings, declarations, visions, strategies
• Next generations: the children
• What do we do now?

There is a proposal to develop the hundreds of hours of video and audiotape into a package of resource materials, if only to match the printed summaries of the 1893 event.

D. Alternative realities

There is no question but that the event aroused great enthusiasm, attracted many highly-motivated people, and was considered a unique experience in which it was a privilege to participate. The organizers achieved much against considerable odds.

The question raised by the event is not so much what it did achieve **as** what it did not achieve. Because of the natural tendency to sustain the momentum of the event amongst waverers, it becomes difficult to detect challenges through which further learning and development could

take place. Any such challenges can only be seen as detracting unfruitfully from the acclaimed success of the event at a time when most initiatives tend to be evaluated in their most positive light to disguise any failure. In a media-oriented society it is frequently forgotten that it is only from failures that actual learning occurs — a reason for the power of science compared to religion. And yet most spiritual disciplines do claim a creative response to failure and the rooting out of weaknesses.

Where lies the future of inter-faith dialogue following such an event? To pursue this question, psychothérapeute practices suggest a need to explore the "shadow" of the event to discover less comfortable realities which can challenge any tendency to complacency. It is one thing to build a positive reality to enhance communication between those who respond, it is another to understand the realities of others who do not, and who stay away. They too are part of the future of the dialogue.

The event can be observed through a number of other frames to enable recognition of possible weaknesses.

"Stockholder" perspective

Financing the event was a major challenge, especially prior to receipt of an unpredictable level of registration fees. At one stage in the preparations, the organizers had lost their donated office space and the initiative had to be reorganized with fresh funding. This creates a situation in which people may be persuaded to "invest" as stakeholders in exchange for some privileged "hold" on the structure of the event and the nature of their participation in it. What privileges could be offered in an inter-faith gathering of this kind? They could include membership of the Board of Trustees, a privileged slot in the programme, facilitated distribution of a particular message, and personal access to religious celebrities.

Who "bought" themselves a slice of the programme? It is perhaps understandable, for example, that a page of the Parliament programme should be dedicated to announcing the presentation of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, since John Templeton was one of the principal donors to the Parliament — but some might query the intention when the recipient had been imprisoned for his role in the Watergate affair. Or perhaps it suggests useful interpretations of a *Global Ethic* through which criminals can absolve their debt to society. Others might query the place given to the Millenium Institute in the programme and in their privileged communication to the Assembly. It would of course be difficult for any organizers to avoid pressures of this kind. The question is how they affected the quality of the event. Researchers of the future will no doubt speculate on this in the light of the many clues in the programme document.

"Marketing" perspective

The event had to be "sold" to target groups to ensure an appropriate level of participation in the programme. Programme slots can be seen as a commodity for which a demand can be created. Individuals and groups respond according to their perception of the opportunity that such slots represent - for they too may be concerned to market their own wares, whether a belief system, workshops, publications, or a programme of some kind. Many religious

leaders are continually sensitive to how they are marketing themselves. What compromises were the organizers forced to make in the balance of the programme in order to ensure the presence of particular groups? In a sense the whole event may be seen as an effort by the organizers to market the *Global Ethic* as effectively as possible. What effect do such marketing pressures have on the dialogue process ?

As the event snowballed in importance, the organizers were as much on the receiving end of demands for slots as endeavouring to ensure the presence of persons and groups important to their own mix of objectives. The structure of the programme seems to have evolved into a mechanism for making available programme slots (a particular room at a given time). The Palmer House had many smaller meeting rooms suitable for this purpose. As a "market place", the issue of how each such item fitted into the event as a whole did not have to be raised too strongly. Such sub-events could be, and were, effectively isolated. Too often they only catered to their own constituency or market.

For many participants, participation could be justified because at $300 registration it offered a mega-package of lectures and workshops that was cheap compared to similar residential weekend offerings. Seldom can such a set of personalities and "gurus" be sampled in one place. As such the event could be seen as breaking new ground as a "supermarket" of transformational experiences offered to enlightened consumers — or at least to those in search of enlightenment.

"Public relations" perspective: show and celebration

All concerned wanted a good show to affirm the importance of inter-faith dialogue. But as in many events, strong presentations and performances can obscure the need to address issues which do not make for good showmanship. How did the organizers compromise on this front? What got lost in the glare of the floodlights?

When does showmanship become counterproductive? The answer could well be sooner for other cultures than is generally assumed by North Americans. Sacred gestures for some can quickly become empty gestures and parlour games for others. Perhaps the old adage should be modified to: One person's celebration is another person's alienation.

Some non-American participants were so repelled by the superficiality that they abandoned the event. Others from afar reported being so alienated by the "window shopping" attitude evoked that they switched effort to window shopping in down-town Chicago. How insignificant is the message of such a minority — especially since others were ecstatic with the experiences offered ?

"Political" perspective

Of major importance in any inter-faith event is the question of inter-faith politics. The central issue of religious controversy is now whether the main religions are equally valid as the way to the same God. Thus evangelicals and fundamentalists protest against inter-faith events as a betrayal of their faith. The organizers were therefore remarkably

successful in ensuring the presence on equal terms of a wide range of religions.

A major drama in organizing the event arose between two factions: those concerned to restrict it to established religious traditions and those concerned to include all manifestations of spirituality. The latter apparently triumphed but what was the price of their success? Did Father Keating, a key figure in the dialogue movement, withdraw for this reason ? The full title of the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders was clearly one effort at a compromise. The last minute resignation of the Executive Director of the organizing group reflected some other major tension which was never disclosed. Is it not time that such differences were creatively used in conferences as a way of focusing and integrating contrasting patterns of insights? Differences will not go away until they are effectively addressed.

Given the traditional attitudes of religions since the Middle Ages, what courage to withstand pressures for the exclusion of practitioners of witchcraft and those of neo-pagan persuasion — even though it led to a walkout by Orthodox Christians. Four Jewish groups withdrew their sponsorship to protest the presence of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. The organizers successfully concealed most dynamics of this kind although they are arguably at the core of inter-faith dialogue.

Which groups refused to participate, or boycotted the event (such as the Evangelical Christians)? Which other groups walked out and why? Are some faiths more inclined to interfaith dialogue than others? Which groups seemed to acquire greater prominence than might otherwise appear justified (such as the Fellowship of Isis) and why? How is it that approximately 0.25 percent of Zoroastrians worldwide were in Chicago? Which groups were only represented in a token manner rather than by some hierarchical head? Which groups were considered to be inappropriately represented by others? Who perceived whom to be "charlatans"? Why did the Dalai Lama acquire such political significance?

What was the nature of the relationship with the other inter-faith initiatives? Each such initiative effectively "competes" with the others, so their enthusiasm for each others approach must necessarily be tempered with self-interest. Some even sought assurances, prior to participating, that they would not be put out of business.

It is naive to expect inter-faith dialogue to evolve if power relationships are ignored. There is much learning to be gained from such relationships. They mark real challenges. The organizers seem to have felt that the coherence of the event, as a "good show", was so fragile that participants could not be exposed to such realities. And yet who exactly is fooled by such cover-ups when some were reported daily in the press and others are a matter of rumour and hearsay? Should not such issues be integrated into the process ? For it is they which determine who meets with whom in the future, and under what conditions.

"UN imitation" perspective

The opening plenary was the occasion of an impressively impassioned speech by Robert Muller, Chancellor of the University of Peace (Costa Rica) and former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations. Muller made a strong argument for a spiritual equivalent to the United Nations — a United Nations of Religions. He argued that the Chicago event was a precursor.

Muller is naturally enthusiastic about the achievements of the United Nations and reluctant to see that there is anything to be learnt from its failures - or those of its member states. But in using the United Nations as a model, care must be taken that deficient patterns are not simply transferred from one realm to another.

The main religions can indeed be seen like member states of a spiritual United Nations. Was the Assembly a precursor of its General Assembly - with the *Global Ethic* as the preamble to its Charter? But the more limited number of "principal" religions can also be seen as protecting their interests, purportedly through defending those of the whole, by giving themselves the privileges of membership of a spiritual Security Council. Was it these whose behind-the-scenes actions most heavily influenced the structure of the event?

And then there are the "others", corresponding to the NGOs and peoples organizations of the UN model - for whom the UN claims to act. These are the spiritually oriented groups and communities which do not form part of the traditionally established pattern of religions. In Chicago these were the "co-sponsors" and organizers of a huge array of seminars, workshops and presentations. As with the United Nations, they met in a location carefully separated from the Assembly. As with the United Nations Conferences (Earth Summit in Rio, etc.) they too were under pressure to have their Global Forum in the form of the Parliament of the People. And they too were encouraged to devote their efforts to communicate their insights to a distant Assembly with other priorities. The weaknesses and abuses of such processes are too well-known in the UN context. Does the UN ever take serious account of the insights from such parallel forums? Should this model really be followed enthusiastically?

"Social" perspective

How was it to be an ordinary participant at the event, or even a "mid-level" presenter? What was the impact of a major convention hotel environment on the interactions between people?

As an exercise in creative chaos, the event was experienced as confusing by many. The programme was such that people were constantly moving between rooms and floors to catch particular events. Elevator delays proved a major irritant. Frequent use was made of the emergency stairwells. For some it felt like being herded, filtered and sorted through a stockyard (Chicago was once renowned for its stockyards !). It was difficult to find any environment in which to establish contact with other participants — despite the huge badges that each wore like a prize steer (some even had an attached array of ribbons !). Is name and origin a sufficient condition to evoke meaningful dialogue ? And is the elevator the best context to initiate it? Several participants even reported on the comparative merits of the toilet in this respect, recalling the old quip : "If you can Pee together then you can Be together".

As the correspondent of Hinduism Today put it, despite the remarkable selection of events: *"...some how the hallways proved the real meeting ground. Miles of ornate hallway along which seekers cruised - greeting, meeting, gawking, photographing, exchanging addresses. It all, at least the important part, seemed to happen in the halls: TV camera crews, radio interviews, promotion of ideas, shar-*

ing of experiences, encounters with old friends. Around any corner or waiting for the elevator you could meet spiritual leaders from any of 40 major faiths and 200 sects and paths. There were healers, prophets, avatars, gurus and visionaries. " (5)

Arguably the environment could be perceived as totally alienating to those of certain cultural or spiritual sensitivities. In that sense the event was for those of thicker skin, or for those who could organize their participation from their hotel room or suite — which many of other cultures chose to do. One alternative was the Parliament of the People in which dialogue was facilitated. This meant that some 300 people (5 percent of registrants) in groups of 10 to 20 were asked to address particular issues and to discuss their response to them. These structured dialogues did not allow people to form any relationships outside the externally imposed framework. Such dialogues were product oriented rather than process oriented.

How many left the event without having benefitted from contact with others there with whom they could have interacted meaningfully in the furtherance of inter-faith dialogue? At what level does such wastage become unacceptable, given the resources allocated to the event and the expectations of the many unable to attend?

But one participant argued : *"My opinion is that the Parliament fulfilled its historic promise. I applaud the triumph that I strongly feel it was. The scale made it a truly people's event, open to all. If you are a church of one, you were allowed to come. I enjoyed the weirdness of it. I mean, it was really weird. There were just all kinds of people here. There was an immense psychic energy because of the openness of the event There were so many charismatic leaders there. I have really never experienced anything like it. That was very important to see and to experience. "*

"Communication" perspective

Potentially the event offered tremendous opportunities for communication, networking and dialogue. But in fact the organizers seem to have been deeply concerned to exert maximum control over this process. In effect only "authorized" people were allowed to communicate "at" other participants. The communication in the open sessions was all one way. Apparently there was considerable fear of potential disruption if participants were allowed to question or challenge the approved speakers — many of whom were figures of spiritual authority. Worse still was apparently the prospect that participants might actually address each other during a session — bypassing the podium. Religions suffer deeply from the teaching paradigm which demeans all but the teachers — a view that is not acceptable to many others with a deep spiritual commitment. Does the spirit of dialogue not suggest that we all have the capacity to learn from each other?

The structured opportunity for dialogue within the Parliament of the People was only squeezed into the programme at the last minute against strong resistance — and scheduled at a time when weary participants would be anxious to take a break for lunch. Was this really necessary?

Opposition by the organizers to communication between participants was most evident in the strictly implemented policy preventing participants from distributing any materials of their own. This did not prevent people

from trying. But all such handout materials were frequently cleared off available surfaces by the hotel housecleaning staff on explicit instructions from the Board of Trustees. This is totally contrary to the tendency in most North American conventions which encourage participants to communicate their projects and wares - usually on display tables. But in Chicago, even the message board envisaged for 6,000 people was limited initially to flipchart size. What exactly were the organizers afraid of? Could this process not be seen as a useful safety valve?

Typical lost opportunities included the inability to make known (and collaborate in) such inter-faith initiatives as indicated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 :
Lost communication opportunities

• An *International Biographical Directory of Religion* (6) incorporating profiles of leading representatives of the religions represented at the Parliament

• An ongoing compilation across all spiritual and psychological disciplines of 1,400 approaches to human development, and the 3,000 associated modes of awareness in the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* (7)

• A planned *ReligioGuide* (8) profiling of some 150 religions, highlighting points to be born in mind in seeking dialogue with them (an extension of the completed Brigham Young University program of 150 *Culturgram* profiles of national cultures)

As one attempt to improve communication between participants, the messaging newsletter *Your Voice* (9) was set up using inputs via suggestion boxes — as a last minute initiative by several members of the facilitation team equipped with notebook computers. It was funded through a handful of spontaneous contributions from participants and a line of credit from a local photocopy shop). Despite attempts at negotiations with the organizers, the boxes (with any messages) and the resulting newsletters were also trashed on occasion. A variety of techniques was developed to bypass these constraints to ensure some level of distribution. One is reminded of the Soviet attitude to the distribution of samizdat literature during the most repressive periods. Why should an inter-faith group follow that route so rigidly? Is there really a case for religious totalitarianism ? Or was this part of a deal to placate one of the reluctant religious groups?

Was there really no formula under which the list of participants could be made available to facilitate subsequent networking? Copies could have been sold to cover costs — or did this detract from the marketability of the mailing list after the event, or from a "competitive advantage" in organizing future inter-faith events? People could have been questioned on registration as to whether they wished their full address to be available in this way. Was it because the organizers feared to reveal significant absences or imbalances amongst the origins of those present? Was it up to the organizers to resolve the classic problem between maximizing the potential for networking and minimizing the potential for junk marl solicitation?

"Facilitation" perspective

It is in North America that the widest range of meeting facilitation skills has been developed. Facilitators are however most frequently called upon to work under controlled conditions, whether in a corporate environment or where participants effectively contract for a facilitated meeting. It is rare for facilitators to be used in open meetings where they have no mandate from the floor to impose their favourite process. There is still strong resistance to the implication that participants might be "therapeutized" in some way. Such resistances are especially strong in international and multi-cultural events — typical of inter-faith gatherings.

Under these circumstances it was only just prior to the event that the formation of the 30-strong team of professional facilitators was approved. Members volunteered their services, which were effectively given anonymously (in some cases on a round-the-clock basis). Its focus was initially limited to the Parliament of the People (itself a last minute initiative) and the associated "lodges". The emphasis was on providing low-profile facilitation but nevertheless to focus discussion to provide inputs to the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders — later discovered to be unable to take account of them. Facilitators were, with very few exceptions, from the USA. Despite their general lack of experience in multi-cultural, international meetings, they exhibited considerable confidence in the validity of their approach and their capacity to "run" dialogue groups.

The Parliament of the People seemed to attract people of primarily Caucasian origin — perhaps because those of other cultures attach greater importance to lunch or to other noon-time practices ! In this sense the facilitators and participants were well-matched and both expressed considerable satisfaction at the evolution of the process. This led to the formulation of participant insights on "post-its" that were clustered by groups of facilitators and represented to participants on the following day. They were also typed into issues of *Your Voice* (9).

The organizers were unsure how to respond to the challenge of how to conduct the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. In the week prior to the event the suggestion was made to use the team of facilitators. Initially this was limited to using one facilitator per Assembly table of eight — with instructions to function in a low-key mode. Their apparent success with the early sessions of the Parliament of the People, and the stresses in the Assembly resulting from protests at the imposition of the *Global Ethic*, then led to the suggestion that aspects of the insight formulation process of the Parliament be used in the final two days of the Assembly.

The challenge in both contexts was that although the processes were successfully implemented — leading to impressive wall displays of clustered insights — this achievement could not be built upon. As with all such processes, it captures those insights which those participants who are prepared to "play the game" choose to formulate under those conditions. For those for whom the process is unsatisfactory, the options available are token responses, avoidance, and ignoring its results. And indeed in the Assembly, few of the distinguished leaders felt free enough to inspect the resulting wall displays. And because of the logistical problems imposed on *Your Voice* (9), the typed

version of the wall charts, included in the final issue, was not available until the last moments of the Assembly.

Despite its weaknesses, and given the constraints, the facilitation was nevertheless an unusually impressive exercise for a major event of this kind. What would it have taken to derive more from the openness of the organizers to a measure of facilitation? What forms of facilitation need to be evolved for such events? How can the enthusiasm for any particular process be appropriately constrained, knowing that every process will be seen as inappropriate to some key constituency in the inter-faith dialogue?

"Guidance and control" perspective

It is clear from the above that control was a major concern for the organizers. The security challenge was far from negligible — a point effectively made during the Assembly by Louis Farrakhan's six large bodyguards. There was obviously great fear that things would get out of control. It is of course ironic that this perspective should be paramount in a gathering of spiritually motivated participants. But perhaps this is a recognition of the conflict exacerbating tendencies of religions despite the peaceful values to which they all subscribe so enthusiastically. Was there a more appropriate balance to be struck between control and trust? Must such people of good faith be treated like children?

There were comments concerning the inaccessibility of the organizers. They were essentially uncontactable by ordinary participants, creating the impression that they had set up a defensive fortress around themselves. Perhaps the organizers were truly overwhelmed by the quantitative success of their enterprise. Perhaps the ordinary participants were of little significance to them. The organizers certainly gave the impression of being unwilling to listen.

The focus of the concern for control was most evident in the organization of the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. The organizers were rightly concerned to avoid lengthy posturing exercises by those well-known to have little resistance to this professional temptation. But, in an amazing piece of symbolism, the leaders were divided up into small tables with no access to a microphone. These tables were overlooked by an unusually high podium (a heritage of the stock exchange role of the room) from which the Chairman of the Board of Trustees ruled the room through the only microphone. Was there any sensitivity to those spiritual traditions in which none should be positioned physically higher than their spiritual leader? There was a member of the Board of Trustees at each table, symbolizing for some the role of the political commissar in the past. Hopefully the presence of a facilitator symbolized a more fruitful function for the future.

The first day of the Assembly was highly structured into short time frames each with a specific objective. It is somewhat disconcerting to see Zen Masters and others required to discuss an imposed topic for a specific number of minutes before being moved on (because of "time pressure") to the next phase towards the achievement of the organizers' objective in seeking signature of the *Global Ethic* (10), Given the location, perhaps there was some metaphoric confusion between the processes of the stock exchange and those of the stockyards! How could the organizers have led themselves to believe that people of such authority would allow themselves to be "steered" and

"herded" in this way? And why would they want it to be so? What antiquated understandings of consensus and order were governing their efforts?

Is covering up fundamental differences and highlighting superficial consensus all that our collective knowledge and spiritual insight have to offer as a strategy? Neglect of such questions led to a degradation of the Assembly process on its final day when the pressure to sign the *Global Ethic* was brought to a focus. Different factions refused to be manoeuvred, and endeavoured to make lengthy speeches. Amazingly, there were shouting matches and key figures walked out. The organizer's, endeavouring to conduct the performance of a pre-scripted piece of music, were faced with an orchestra that had abandoned the score. Members were playing their own tunes — irrespective of the resulting sense of discord. Enlightenment was less than evident for such a spiritual assembly.

The Chicago event terminated with a "Concert for the 21st Century" in a neighbouring park where some 20,000 people assembled. Aside from the music, this included speeches by the Dalai Lama and other figures. But seemingly the organizers had by this time given up their efforts at control, for over a third of the people clustered on the stage were not intended to be there — thus diminishing the significance of the experience for others.

"Spiritual" perspective

In the complexities of the event, the spiritual dimension could easily be forgotten. Each presentation was very much just that — a presentation. And there were many presentations. How was the spiritual dimension nurtured by the event?

One of the significant achievements was the nomination of a core group of the 25 most influential spiritual leaders which met privately for a period over several days. This may prove to be the basis for an ongoing structure or annual event.

In one sense the event was very much an exercise in "fullness" — a full experience par excellence. But what of the sense of "emptiness" which is so important in many traditions ? Even the daily meditations obscured this dimension. As part of the marketing exercise, different groups acquired the right to market their own brand of meditation — often at the price of alienating others to whom the spiritual dimension was also important. A high price was paid by favouring "brand-name" meditations over those which encouraged inter-faith participation.

All "moments of silence" were preceded by lengthy verbal introductions — even in the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. Some periods of "silence" were even provided with a musical accompaniment. If collective silence is to be so feared then maybe more can be learnt from it. It had originally been hoped that many contemplatives would be present to shift the tone of the event. Why was this not possible?

"Hidden" perspectives

Many of those present would attach considerable significance to the event in terms of esoteric or other frameworks. As a confluence of spiritual energies there have been few events with which to compare it. Many prayed for its success, even in distant spiritual communities. Perhaps

to ask how such a gathering of energy was "used" is indeed inappropriate. But perhaps failing to guard against "abuse" leaves the gathering open to subtle forms of manipulation by those more skilled in such processes. Maybe there was a case for more "psychic security" and less physical security !

Nevertheless there seems to have been a significant gap between those who saw the event as "symbolically"

Figure 6 :
Union of International Associations support

A combination of factors enabled the Union of International Associations to further its long-term exploration of complex international events by funding (partially or completely) participation of four people in Chicago associated with the team of facilitators for the Parliament of the People and the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders:

• Tim Casswell (Co-founder of Creative Connections, UK, and a former contributor to the UIA's Encyclopedia) performed a key role in bringing to a focus the views expressed in the Parliament of the People, and was consequently invited to perform the same service for the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders

• Jon Jenkins (currently co-director of Imaginai Training, Netherlands, and former editor of the UIA's International Biographical Dictionary of Religions, of its Who's Who in International Organizations, and of the World Problems section of the UIA's Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential)

• Anthony Judge (based in Belgium and responsible for the UIA's Yearbook of International Organizations and for its Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential) and author of this note.

" Nadia McLaren (Australian, based in Belgium, currently editor of the World Problems section of the UIA's Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential) was responsible for the participant messaging system Your Voice which was so successful that it carried the final conclusions of the Assembly at the organizers request.

important, as a sign of new beginnings in the search for peace, and those who might have sought to go further to ensure a more effective patterning of the assembled energies in the light of such insights. Of course for some, their deepest insights would attribute perfection to the event as it was — even apparent defects contributing to the harmony of that perfection. For others this view amounts in part to an irritating form of complacency.

As one journalist put it: "many Parliament participants dream of more than breaking bread with one another." One reason given for the event by the organizers was indeed "to create for our time a new conversation." Nowhere is the nature of that conversation envisaged. From this perspective the participants could be described as having been over-blessed, over-inspired, over-informed and under-worked by the process of the Parliament.

Part II of this note explores some insights arising from the challenges and questions highlighted by the Chicago Parliament.

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