A Report on the Parliament of the World's Religions, 2018, Toronto, Canada by Queen's College lecturer Michelle Rebidoux.

The Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions is an interfaith organization, established in 1993, which convenes, every three to six years, the largest interfaith gatherings in the world today. The first such "Parliament" was held in 1893 in Chicago and was then called the World Parliament of Religions. That first Parliament very much reflected the intellectual-spiritual climate of its time. The late 19th – early 20th century was an era of flourishing interfaith dialogue, inspired, to a great extent, by the rise of the human sciences in the 19th century, including the sciences of anthropology of religion and comparative religion, and, along with these fields, the rise of endowed chairs for the study of religion (as distinct from theology) in many major European and North American universities. The 1893 Parliament of Religions was followed by a close series of other such gatherings—held in Stockholm (1897), Paris (1900), Basel (1904), and Oxford (1908)—which employed these academic approaches to religion to initiate dialogue and the goal of mutual understanding and appreciation among leaders and practitioners of the various religious traditions. Overall, the tone of these gatherings was heavily syncretistic: the basic tendency was to assume that all religions were really the same at their core, and that they simply used different language (historically and culturally determined) to express universal, and largely ineffable, Truth about the divine.

This flourishing period of interfaith activity, however, quickly came to an end with the onslaught of WWI. Between the two World Wars there was little to no interfaith activity on such a major scale, and, in universities, the fields of anthropology of religion and comparative religion were slowly becoming academically unfashionable, with endowed chairs in those areas being discontinued as their holders retired. After WWII, there was some interfaith activity largely taking the form of dialogue between individual religious writers and leaders/practitioners, but it was not until the late 1980s that a wide-spread interest in large-scale gatherings, with participation of "the academy", was revived. Why this sudden renewal of interest in interfaith dialogue at just that time? For a number of reasons. First of all, by the late 1980s the post-colonial era was well underway, such that an emphasis on respectfully listening to voices from, and engaging in dialogue with, peoples/cultures/religions of non-European heritage (and largely representing the critique of Western colonialism) became a distinct moral mandate of Western academic culture. Indeed, Western academic culture itself was becoming more and more populated by scholars of non-Western heritage. In this context, also, "Third Wave" feminism flourished, which pointed out that patriarchal oppression cuts not only along sex/gender lines, but also along race, class, and global north/south lines. Further, by the late 1980s the environmental movement was already strong and growing rapidly, and along with that, the academic field of religion and the environment, or religion and ecology, was burgeoning. To that extent, the interest in interfaith dialogue that emerged in this new socio-historical context proved to be deeply altered in its nature, distinctly rejecting its former syncretistic tone (which syncretism was *itself*, in the late 19th – early 20th century, a product of Western Enlightenment universalism).

In the late 1980s, therefore, efforts to revive the activity of interfaith dialogue on a major scale resulted in the establishment of the Council of the Parliament of the World's Religions (slightly altering the name from the 1893 Parliament), which convened the first major gathering of its kind since the early 20th century in 1993 in Chicago (the choice of the year and the location was, of course, intended to honour the site and the 100th anniversary of the 1893 Parliament). Since that time—along with countless other such initiatives that have grown quite organically at the regional, international, national, and local levels, all around the world—the Parliament of the World's Religions has been convened every three to six years: held in Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004), Melbourne (2009), Salt Lake City (2015), and most recently, Toronto (early November, 2018).

This year, primarily due to Toronto's relative proximity, I was able to attend and present at the Parliament. Of course, it was not my first engagement in interfaith dialogue. Since 2008 I have taught the course in Religions of the World in the Religious Studies department at MUN. I have also taught an interfaith course at Queen's College called Faiths and the Common Good. In addition to this I have been involved, for approximately five years, in two local initiatives in St. John's: the annual Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue (in which I am a member of the organizing committee and have been twice the speaker representing the Christian voice), and the Multi-faith Symposium organized by the Hindu Temple (which I attend regularly and in which I have been once the speaker representing the Christian voice). What I'd like to share in what follows is a few thoughts about the recent Parliament in Toronto.

I said above that the factors that gave rise to a renewal of interest in interfaith dialogue in the late 1980s also deeply altered its nature. What has dominated interfaith dialogue at the Parliament since 1993, and certainly dominated the Parliament in Toronto, is a focus upon issues: the environmental crisis, the refugee crisis, human rights issues, women's issues, indigenous peoples' issues, etc. People from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds come together in such gatherings to share with others their critiques of and inspirations from each their own traditions to address these problems. Indeed, this year's Parliament was the very first in its history in which there were no categories for proposals for presentations on religions in general: no category on, say, Christianity, or Judaism, or Hinduism, etc. Rather, *every* category was issue-oriented. People who wanted to present something from a Christian or Jewish or Hindu perspective, generally had to present their perspective through the address of one of the six predefined tracks: 1) women's issues; 2) countering war, hate, and violence; 3) climate action; 4) indigenous peoples' issues; 5) a focus on youth; and 6) issues of ethics and justice. This final track, being perhaps the most flexible in definition, basically ended up housing quite a variety of presentations that just didn't seem to fit anywhere else—for example, presentations on individual spiritual teachers, on different types of spiritual practice, or by those coming from the "SBNR" (spiritual but not religious) perspective. Granted, in such topics one may still find strong tendencies towards the old syncretism of the last century. But for the most part, interfaith dialogue today is responding, with ever growing urgency, to the global crisis

taking place on many levels: cultural, political, environmental, moral, and spiritual. To be sure, a lot of what goes on in such gatherings might be described as “preaching to the choir”. But of major importance is the way in which such “preaching” serves as a reinforcement, as a source of new ideas and inspirations, and thus as a strength, for so many people who, in their struggle to be agents of change in a nearly intransigent world filled with injustices, are perpetually at risk of losing hope and surrendering to the temptations of apathy and despair. For all our differences we share this planet in common; and people who engage in interfaith dialogue today are passionately committed to its care as our common home. May God bless that common commitment and its promise for a future of a globally unified human family living in peace!