

Religions for peace, not hate

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*The Rector, Alan Race, reports on his attendance at one of the world's greatest interfaith gatherings.*

A common assumption these days is that religions are a source of hate and conflict in the world. The exact opposite point of view was celebrated at a recent gathering of people from different religions, which I attended in October earlier this year. The so-called Parliament of the World's Religions, the fifth since 1993, was held at Salt Lake City in Utah State, USA, and marked another milestone in the growing movement for interfaith co-operation around the world.

The event was not so much a Parliament in the usual sense, as a huge coming together of nearly 10,000 people, dedicated to learning about one another and promoting the virtues of peaceful co-existence and shared values. Of the participants, women and young people under 30 made up more than 65% of the total numbers.

At the Parliament there is something for everyone, including music, dance, worship, seminars, lectures, art and different foods. You could learn about Christians working for justice and peace, or about Hindu meditation and yoga, or about native American ties with the natural world, or even about Mormon feminism. Everywhere the emphasis was on what faiths can give to one another and to the world.

Some of the most moving moments came when we heard first-hand from young adults of how they had witnessed the killing of family members through hate crime and then went on to dedicate themselves to work for better understanding between cultures and faiths and promote the value of diversity. These were impressive people who give hope to the world by refusing to return hate for hate. Sikhs, Muslims, Christians and Jews were united in their determination to present the true worth of compassion, trust and service.

It was thrilling to hear Jane Goodall, well-known for her work among chimpanzees, speaking about threats to the environment either through human intervention or through human preparations for nuclear war. Nuclear weapons were now thousands of times more powerful than the first bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. This goes well beyond anything deterrence theory ever envisaged. So who among the nations will be bold enough to confront such madness?

The Dalai Lama was prevented from attending through illness. But he sent a message, saying that our problems are of our own making and that "we must take responsibility for our actions." No-one was going to disagree with this call from one of the world's most respected religious leaders.

I was there with an American friend and colleague, Jim Kenney, to lead a workshop on the themes of cultural evolution and interfaith dialogue. We presented our thoughts on how values are evolving towards a better fit with what we know about the world through experience and analysis – for example, that violence is actually decreasing in the world or that the argument for equality between genders has been won, often in spite of what looks to be the case, and that the future of religious awareness lies in dialogue between traditions. Looking at how these themes might play out in different parts of the world rescues us all from our limited knowledge and narrow-mindedness.

On the Sunday morning there was an interfaith devotional time, when we used prayers and sayings from different traditions to help lift the heart. The theme here was 'Peace in our hearts, Peace in our world'. Christians, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists joined harmoniously before the mystery of existence and the mystery of whatever we might mean by the reality of 'God'.

The Parliament of Religions is held in a different part of the world every four years. There was talk over coffee breaks about the possibility of coming to London. I tried to encourage the rumour as best I could!