STATEMENT DW200

The 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions
by Elliot Miller

(Part One: Interreligious Dialogue or New Age Rally?)

Saturday morning, August 28: I have just picked up my press pass and information packet and am trying to exit the fourth floor of Chicago’s magnificent Palmer House Hilton Hotel. The lobby is so packed with bodies it takes me 15 minutes to move 100 feet, and 15 more minutes to find an opening on an elevator. And what a spectacle this throng is: from saffron robes and shaved heads to tightly wrapped turbans and flowing beards, this is the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions, and it seems no religion lacks a delegate here.

There are representatives from seemingly every school of Hinduism and Buddhism; Jains, Sikhs, Confucianists, and Taoists; Zoroastrians, Jews, Muslims, and Baha’is; representatives of numerous indigenous religions, especially native American traditions; Mormons; Rastafarians, witches and other neopagans; Theosophists and numerous other New Agers; Catholic clergy and laity and liberal Protestants; even a few evangelicals (although most of them, like me, are here to observe and report, not to join in the spirit of the event). The delegates are generally courteous and friendly. The halls of the hotel are charged with excitement and anticipation — we all expect to see history in the making.

THE FIRST PARLIAMENT (1893): EAST MEETS WEST

Such expectation can be attributed in part to the knowledge that 100 years ago the original World’s Parliament of Religions — held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition of the Chicago World’s Fair — did indeed have a profound affect on 20th century religion. Although the gathering was predominantly Christian, both in delegates and themes — and was not truly global (since the majority of the world’s religions were not represented), it provided the occasion for a very favorable introduction of certain Eastern and Near-Eastern religions to the West (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, the Baha’i Faith).

It was at the first Parliament that Swami Vivekananda won over his audience — many of whom had low expectations of an “uncivilized heathen” — with his gentle manner and erudite presentation. Vivekananda was a 30-year-old Indian disciple of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-86), a revered “avatar” (god-man) who claimed he had followed the devotional teachings of several religions (including Christianity) and found them to be essentially the same as those of his own Hindu faith. Vivekananda delved this theme with great success at the Parliament, speaking reverently of Christ and affirming that the God worshiped by many names in the world’s religions is one and the same. Capitalizing on his popularity, after the Parliament Vivekananda established “Vedanta Societies” (affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order in India) in several American cities. These were the first missionary outposts for an Eastern religion in the U.S., to be followed by Swami Yogananda’s Self Realization Fellowship ship in the 1920s and literally hundreds more, especially after immigration restrictions were lifted in 1965.

The first Parliament is also marked as the beginning of the interfaith movement, with its formal pursuit of dialogue and cooperation among the world’s religions. Today the interfaith movement is robust (as evidenced by the massive turnout for this year’s Parliament), with several organizations carrying on its work, including the London-based World Congress of Faiths; the World Conference on Religion and Peace, in New York; and the Temple of Understanding, out of New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

The religious landscape in the West has changed dramatically over the past 100 years, and the 1893 Parliament contributed significantly to that change. As the centennial of that celebrated gathering approached, it seemed to many observers (including myself) that — as a result of all that change — the world was now extremely ripe for another such parliament.

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THE PRESENT PARLIAMENT: PEOPLE AND PROGRAMMING

Interfaith workers in Chicago recognized this golden opportunity to promote their cause. “It began five years ago as the brainstorm of a dozen Chicago Baha’is, Buddhists, Hindus and Zoroastrians. They enlisted a few Christians in their effort to reprise the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions…”1

Organizers told the press that the purpose of the eight-day convocation was to promote understanding and collaboration among the world’s religions. According to The San Diego Union Tribune, parliament leaders hoped to “reach agreement on a universal declaration of human values, and perhaps even lay the groundwork for a future organization akin to a United Nations of Religions.”2 “I’m very much in favor of a United Nations of Religions,” says Asad Hussain, president of the American Islamic College in Chicago and a trustee of the parliament. “We are going....for a religious renaissance that will give real hope and happiness to the people of the world.”3

According to David Ramage, chairman of the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions, “Never has there been so large a meeting of representatives from every faith in the world.”4 There were 6,500 in attendance from about 250 religious traditions.

The diversity of faiths represented reflected the changing face of American religion. In Chicago alone there are roughly 100,000 Hindus, 155,000 Buddhists, 2,500 Jains, 500 Zoroastrians, 2,000 Baha’is, 15,000 Native Americans (not all of whom practice their traditional religions, of course), and 250,000 Muslims.5 As the Christian Century observed: “A century ago Jews and Catholics looked to the Parliament to find greater recognition and acceptance in American life; at this year’s event religious movements such as the Fellowship of Isis, the Covenant of the Goddess, and the Lyceum of Venus of Healing sought attention and respectability alongside older, more established traditions.”6

Not all religious traditions were well represented. Along with evangelical Protestants, orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Muslims were conspicuously absent. Mainline Protestants6 and followers of Japanese religions were also low in number.

Roman Catholicism, however, had a strong presence. Archbishop of Chicago Joseph Cardinal Bernardin participated in the opening and closing ceremonies. In a major presentation, Archbishop Francesco Gioia, a Vatican official, presented the official position of Rome on religious dialogue. And there were numerous religious and lay Catholics making presentations and participating in dialogue.

Mother Teresa was to have been a featured speaker, but she was unable to attend due to health problems. “You are doing God’s work,” she told the Council’s executive director, Daniel Gomez-Ibanez, in a phone conversation. “I wanted to come very much. I know that your work is very important because you are working for the glory of God and the good of the whole world.”7

The Parliament’s planners also scheduled another celebrated religious figure: the Dalai Lama, spiritual and temporal head of six million Tibetans. In this case they were not disappointed. He charmed the press on Thursday, and — during the closing festivities at Grant Park on the night of Saturday, September 4 — he drew a spirited response from the estimated 20,000 in attendance. The scent of marijuana wafted through the air as the Dalai Lama, Cardinal Bernardin, and others spoke that evening of the sobering challenges facing humanity in the 21st century.

Included among dozens of notable speakers during the week of the Parliament were former United Nations assistant secretary-general Robert Müller, noted and controversial Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng, and Gerald O. Barney, a “global modeler” who directed the U.S. government’s Global 2000 Report to the President (1980). Barney’s most recent project is the Millennium Institute, a nonprofit organization which over the past decade has “helped research teams in a fifth of the countries of the world as they prepared a long-term outlook for their country.”8

(It should be noted that, contrary to what has been rumored in some evangelical circles, Charles Colson was not a participant in the Parliament. Rather, he was granted the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, an award that has been bestowed annually for the past 20 years. Because Sir John Templeton was also a trustee for the Parliament, the two events were scheduled to occur in the same city during the same week — but not at the same location. Nonetheless, perhaps because Colson is an evangelical, the award ceremony was barely noted at the Parliament. In his acceptance speech before an interfaith audience of thousands, Colson delivered a powerful prophetic warning concerning the social dangers of cultural relativism, utopianism, and other beliefs that were being heavily promoted all week at the Parliament.)

As conferences go, the Parliament was extraordinarily packed with programming and grueling in its schedule. There were a total of 12 plenary sessions (often over three hours long) and almost 800 symposiums, lectures, work shops, exhibits, off-site cultural events, films, and live performances.

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Having attended several New Age conferences and expositions, the Parliament had a familiar feel to me. The structure of the programming, the mood of the event, the topics discussed, and the kinds of people in attendance were often reminiscent of those kinds of affairs. However, this convention was also different in that it was truly a gathering of representatives from all the world’s religions, and many of those faithful do not possess a New Age mindset. But in the spiritually charged atmosphere that pervaded the Parliament such religious adherents could be especially vulnerable to the ideology of the New Age. In effect, the event had the potential to move the vision of a world politically and spiritually united around New Age values and mysticism from the Western middle class to the world’s religions at large.

**WAS THERE A HIDDEN AGENDA?**

Did such a promotion of the New Age agenda underlie the Parliament’s ostensible purpose of furthering interreligious dialogue? I suspected beforehand that this was the case, after noting that many prominent New Agers were involved at different levels with the organization of the event. As the week unfolded I became increasingly convinced: the occasion of the first Parliament’s centennial was being exploited by the present Parliament’s organizers, who wished to gather the world’s religious leaders and then win them over to their own cause.

**Robert Müller: “Interfaith Understanding”**

It seemed no accident that the first plenary address, “Interfaith Understanding,” was delivered by Robert Müller, a leading New Age political figure. His message was classic New Age: “There is one sign after the other, wherever you look, that we are on the eve of a New Age which will be a spiritual age. There is no doubt about it. There is now a convergence of religion and science,” he affirmed, pointing to the fact that scientists are now studying consciousness, meditation, prayer, and religious faith; and that the World Health Organization now recommends spiritual healing and spiritual practices.

Müller cited a report by the Carnegie Foundation which concludes that the absence of spirituality is the cause of the breakdown of Western civilization. At the heart of our present crisis is a spiritual anarchy and impotence. There are no compelling convictions to unite us. Since none of the ideologies presently controlling our societies can bring about an integration of the various spiritual traditions, “men everywhere are searching for a new universalism” (i.e., an approach to spirituality that can integrate existing approaches and thus bring the various religions together — which is what the New Age movement claims to do).

Müller affirmed that this search for a new universalism coincides with the fact that

...we are entering an age of universalism. Wherever you turn, one speaks about global education, global information, global communications — every profession on Earth now is acquiring a global dimension. The whole humanity is becoming interdependent, is becoming one.

The philosopher Leibniz said, when the age of reason and analysis came, humans will be so busy analyzing and dissecting everything they are going to make great discoveries, but at one point they will have cut up reality to such an extent that they would be lost in their complexity. And at that moment there will be an age of universal thinking where we have to put everything together and to understand our universal march in the evolution on this little planet. So we are on the eve of a new spiritual renaissance.

As a matter of fact, I even read in the Dalai Lama bulletin in the plane coming here that the astrologers are predicting that 1993 will be a turning point in human history. Apparently, every 171 years you have a conjunction of Uranus and Neptune in the sign of the Capricorn. And as a result of this in 1497 it was the Renaissance; in 1650 it was the Age of Reason; in 1821 it was the Industrial Revolution; and it is very likely that this Parliament and what is happening now in the world ...is a renaissance, a turning point in human history. So even the astrologers begin to tell us that there will be a fundamental change.

Even the astrologers? In fact, it was astrological myth that provided the initial basis for New Age optimism (“This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius”). And so, of course, Müller could not resist citing astrological support for believing the Parliament would help usher us into the New Age.

Müller observed that the United Nations has gone from providing material aid to the nations to providing an ethical framework for international problems (e.g., human rights). “But the last stage has not yet been arrived at in [the] United Nations, and it is the stage which Sri Chinmoy [the Hindu “guru of the United Nations”] and so many of us in [the] United Nations have heralded; namely, we must add a last dimension to this, which is the highest, which is the greatest, which is the one which would put
everything into place; namely, the spiritual dimension....This is why this Parliament is so vitally important. It comes at the right moment.”

Müller explained that in this post-Cold War era, as we prepare to enter the 21st century, the heads of state are wrestling with the question: “How are we going to govern this planet?” As they work on formulating the new political world order, it is being brought to their attention that we need a new spiritual world order as well. He advised that the conclusions and recommendations of the Parliament be submitted to the UN as a contribution to the thinking being done on the new world order. He proposed that another Parliament of the World’s Religions be held in the year 2000 to see where we stand, and — making his most important observation as a former UN official — he urged that a permanent institution be created:

What is needed is a place where you have a good number of people...work together on a daily basis. This is the miracle I have seen in [the] United Nations....And when you do this in the religions — if you create an international secretariat, or a permanent parliament, or a world spiritual agency — if you do this, everything will change....This is, in my opinion, the most important single result that could come out of this parliament — at least to have a recommendation that a preparatory committee should be established to come up with a proposal of a world spiritual institution which could then be approved by another parliament in a few years from now. And I would very much like to have this done by 1995 — the 50th anniversary of the UN — so that this would be the great spiritual contribution as we go towards the year 2000.

And so, Müller would like to see a world spiritual agency which has political clout — but one which is wedded to the “new universalism” of the New Age.

Gerald Barney: “What Shall We Do?”

With the tone set by Müller on opening night, the assemblage was prepared for the Parliament’s “major address” the following afternoon: Gerald Barney’s “What Shall We Do?” Barney’s was the most important address of the week because it provided the world’s religions with a compelling reason to put aside their differences and lead the way in a planetwide revisioning of society. Again, it seemed no coincidence that this is the same justification New Age thinkers have long used in calling for a planetary transformation: the global “megacrisis.”

At the request of the Parliament’s Council, Barney prepared Global 2000 Revisited: What Shall We Do? a partial update of his 1980 report. His address was a summary of this report (a printed summary — from which I quote below — was also distributed to Parliament delegates).

Barney is clearly a man with a mission, and by his own standards he may have the most important mission of all time. He is trying to communicate a message to the entire planet: the Earth is in serious trouble, comparable to the threat of a nuclear war. There is still time (maybe five to ten years) to do something about it, but many trends are moving us in the wrong direction. This complex crisis can be called the Global Problematique.

Using charts and graphs, Barney informed us that our children could live to see the Earth’s population grow from six to 24 billion. Such “rapid growth...cannot continue through the 21st century and will come to an end either by human decision and action or by an uncontrollable increase in deaths.”

Barney explained that even with the help of yield-increasing technologies the world’s food supply will not be able to keep up with the current rate of population growth, and any effort to make it do so could have devastating environmental consequences. If we wish to avoid seeing first the poorer southern nations and then also the industrialized northern nations “spiral downward into increasingly desperate poverty exacerbated by global environmental deterioration,” we must change our thinking and ways. All people must work together to (a) create the religious, social, and economic conditions necessary to stop the growth of human population [at 12 billion over the next century], (b) reduce the use of resources (sources) and disposal capacity (sinks) by the wealthiest, (c) assure civil order, education, and health services for people everywhere, (d) preserve soils and species everywhere, (e) double agricultural yields while reducing both agricultural dependence on energy and agricultural damage to the environment, (f) convert from carbon dioxide-emitting energy sources to renewable, non-polluting energy sources that are affordable even to the poor, (g) cut sharply the emissions of other greenhouse gases, (h) stop immediately the emissions of the chemicals destroying the ozone layer, and (i) bring equity between nations and peoples of the North and South.

Barney acknowledges that the choice for a sustainable future will be difficult. Perhaps the chief among several reasons for the difficulty is that we will have to accept that our concept of progress — the American Dream — has failed: all nations and individuals cannot one day live as the wealthiest nations and individuals do now. We thought the Earth’s resources could be exploited by as many humans as we could conceive, but the Earth rejects that notion. Therefore, “if we people of Earth are to avoid a massive disaster within the lifetime of our children, our most critical and urgent task is to bring forth a transformed vision

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of progress, one of sustainable and replicable development.” This new vision of progress must be holistic, seeing the relationship between the welfare of our economy and the welfare of the Earth and all its inhabitants, both human and nonhuman. It must be spiritual in nature, and so it must emerge from the world’s religions. Thus he made his appeal to the delegates at the Parliament.

Barney also understands that only if the world’s religious leaders promote such a major shift in values and vision will the people of the Earth accept it. But currently the world’s religions are doing much to exacerbate the problem rather than to solve it. Their approach to the Earth is often anthropocentric (human-centered). He specifically stated that his own faith, Christianity, is not a sustainable faith as practiced now (e.g., the Catholic church’s opposition to birth control and the biblical teaching that man is to take dominion over the Earth). Thus he asked the spiritual leaders, “What are the traditional teachings — and the range of other opinions — within your faith on the possibility of criticism, correction, reinterpretation, and even rejection of ancient traditional assumptions and ‘truth’ in light of new [scientific] understandings or revelations?”

Since changing course will require an immense amount of spiritual and emotional energy — “enough to change the thinking and lives of five billion people,” Barney’s strategy is to “make the most of the opportunity” afforded by the coming of a new millennium. The Millennium Institute is attempting to organize a planetwide celebration that will help create the psychological atmosphere for “dying” to our old 20th century ways of thinking and being and coming alive as citizens of the Earth: “Every person must learn to think like Earth, to act like Earth, to be Earth. As a part of this learning process we must all think through how our part of Earth can contribute to the new....What laws must be changed, what traditions, what beliefs, what institutions?”

Citing a recent papal message addressing the relationship between religion and science, Barney applied what the pope wrote to the relationships between religions: “This lesson of Pope John Paul II might point the way for a new approach to the distrust, hatred, and violence that currently plagues interreligious relations. Might there be beyond the ‘partial and contrasting perceptions’ of the many faith traditions ‘a wider perception that includes them and goes beyond...them?’”

Leo D. Lefebure, writing for the liberal Christian Century, commented: “For me and many other participants, Barney’s address was the most powerful presentation of the entire Parliament. The speech crystallized the aim of the event and set forth a clear compelling agenda for inter-religious cooperation for the sake of all life on the planet. The tensions that surfaced later in the week could not diminish the cogency of Barney’s plea for leadership.”

The respondents to both Barney and Müller’s addresses rarely differed and never presented a strong countering view. This made the Parliament more a rally for the New Age agenda than a legitimate forum for the exchange of ideas among religious people.

In the closing plenary address the Dalai Lama restated many of Barney’s concerns. But his speech was more important to the Parliament because of who he is than for any original contributions in what he said.

“From Vision to Action”

During Monday evening’s plenary session, “From Vision to Action: Celebrating Dialogue,” CRI president Hank Hanegraaff and I watched in amazement as the New Age hand guiding the event became unmistakable. Each new presentation that evening was calculated to effect a conversion to New Age thinking. The Parliament’s program catalogue called it “a process of orientation for thought and action.” No avenue of persuasion was ignored — from the logical, emotional, experiential, and psychic to the use of peer pressure, humor, imagination, and the manipulation of the subconscious. It began with an “interactive musical performance” called the “Truth Spin Dance.” The dancers in the performance would periodically engage in verbal duels over their perceptions of truth. This had the affect of mocking the very notion that there could be only one ultimate Truth. (In this regard, a reference to the “Gospel Truth” drew the loudest laughter from the crowd.) After this session an impressionable spectator might well have concluded that it is very inappropriate and politically incorrect to believe in the existence of objective, knowable religious truth.

Out of the dark during that performance a voice revealed the true goal of the Parliament: “We are building a sacred place that will hold all our polarities and our paradoxes.” In other words, the Parliament’s goal was to construct a religious edifice flexible enough to house all the world’s faiths under one spiritual roof.

Next the “Dialogue Project” from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) took the stage. (The Dialogue Project is a team that facilitates dialogue between all types of groups experiencing differences.) In an effort to help participants see the earth-shaking potential of the Parliament they began with “What If...?” — a performance piece which asked questions like:

What if our sensing a new story...actually shifted the whole world?

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What if there were a river that ran through here this week? And what if we undammed it?

The New Age tone of the evening began to heighten as a woman from the Dialogue Project discussed the importance of cultivating a vision of humanity achieving its collective potential. We were told that dialogue equals deeply hearing another in a new way. Rather than relying on our minds in the dialogue process, we need to receive our answers from “Spirit” (the pianist demonstrated the difference between playing learned music from the mind and improvising from Spirit).

Various methods employed in humanistic psychology were then used to teach us how to really dialogue with one another. First the audience was led through an exercise of humming various tones. Then they were instructed to get together with people they didn’t know and “build thoughts together” by taking turns spontaneously (i.e., “from spirit”) adding words to sentences. Finally the delegates were led through an imaginative experience of temporarily letting go of their beliefs and “noble assumptions.” Dialogue often requires suspension of one’s own beliefs, they informed us. “Take one side of an issue and clench your left fist, feeling the intensity of that energy. Do the same with your right hand. Now let all your fingers go — imagine you are holding the space for differences to coexist.”

Next came an effort to get the participants involved in the New Age networking process. Ella Cisneros, founder of Togethernet, explained how to get on her global computer network “to bring us all closer.” Then members of the Parliament’s program committee explained that over the following four days there would be a “Parliament of the People,” the goal of which was to prepare and deputize Parliament participants to carry on its work when they returned to their homes. Tuesday’s session would be devoted to “visioning”; Wednesday’s to identifying challenges to that vision; Thursday’s to putting together a strategy; Friday’s to making individual commitments to make a difference. These kinds of approaches to initiating grassroots action for the cause of global unity have been employed by many New Age activist groups, such as Planetary Citizens.

To inject a sense of cosmic urgency into becoming involved with this Parliament of the People, New Age visionary and activist Barbara Marx Hubbard shared her concept of “conscious evolution.” According to this classically New Age scenario, the current world megacrisis (Barney’s Global Problematique) is of an evolutionary order — the crisis is actually the birth of a new, living planetary system (i.e., a Global Being, or “Gaia”). In each of the world’s religions there exists a seed, pattern, or blueprint of what is coming next in evolution. Our purpose is to speed up this process.

Now, because of the population crisis women can no longer reproduce to the maximum. But, Hubbard explained, there is a positive side to this: the energy that used to go into procreation is now being channeled into co-creation. Women are now emerging as a creative force. Just as they once created children through the joining of their genes they now are creating the next stage in evolution through the joining of their genius. (At this point I wondered what those delegates who were conservative adherents to their own faiths and not a part of the New Age network were thinking about the evening’s heavy doses of indoctrination.)

Hubbard concluded by proposing a parliament of the peoples of the Earth, connected up as a spiritual democracy. She explained that the vision of the Parliament’s organizers is to see the event generate a whole series of ongoing parliaments, globally and locally. If inspired amateurs like the Parliament’s staff could put this event together, she pointed out, inspired amateurs like those in the audience could go out and replicate the same event many times over.

The Paradigm Shift

Apart from the plenary sessions, the New Age perspective of the Parliament’s organizers came across on several occasions. For example, program chair Jim Kenney stated during a Friday afternoon presentation that he is deeply convinced we are going through a paradigm shift. The sense that a profound transformation is going on is dawning and growing and spreading worldwide. “The conversation in the corridors [of the Palmer House] bespeaks this.” This paradigm shift is all about interdependence: every thing and event in the world is intimately related, which leads to the even more radical conclusion that there is only one Grand Event unfolding (i.e., the New Age process philosophy view of God/the Universe as more fundamentally Event than Being).

When a paradigm shift takes place, Kenney assured us, “it changes absolutely everything.”

As will be demonstrated in the second and final installment of this report on the Parliament, the implication of this paradigm shift for the world’s religions is that all religions are interrelated. In the New Age, it will not be considered acceptable for any religion to make an exclusive claim to the truth.

NOTES
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
7 At least on stage. I personally met quite a few liberal Protestants in the audience.
11 Barney, et al., 5.
12 Ibid., 8.
13 Ibid., 9.
14 Ibid., 10.
15 Ibid., 11.
16 Ibid., 13.
17 Ibid., 14.
18 Lefebure, 887.
19 An example of the few countering views that were expressed: Samuel Ruiz-Garcia, the Roman Catholic bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, maintained that it’s not the size of the family that is creating our food crisis but who is controlling the food.
20 *Catalogue*, 23.
21 See Miller, chapter 1, for background on this emphasis in New Age thinking.
22 Networking (sharing information and cooperating toward various ends) is a defining feature of the New Age movement. See Miller, chapters 1, 5, and 6.
23 See Miller, chapter 6.
24 See Miller, chapters 3 and 4, for a description and critique of this theory/myth.
25 For background on this concept, as well as the related concept of the paradigm shift, see Miller, chapters 3-4.

**(Part Two: The Fundamentalism of Tolerance)**

At times it was hard to take the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions seriously. On several occasions during the eight-day convocation (August 28-September 4), the wacky New Age undercurrent that moved through the event became evident. For example, in a plenary session entitled “Voices of Spirit and Tradition,” it was laughable to find — alongside representatives of Native American, Chinese, and Indian traditions — an American woman from a pantheistic neopagan cult representing “the tradition of Egypt.” Invoking not only the Egyptian goddess Isis but also the Greek goddess Diana, she (mis)informed us that in Egyptian tradition, everything is One and all is divine.

It would be a mistake, however, to write off the Parliament as just one more far-out New Age extravaganza. As we saw in Part One and will see below, this historic gathering of the world’s spiritual leaders may well have far-reaching consequences for religion on the planet. And, considering the dominant themes that ran through the mega-event, any such consequences could have ominous implications for religious conservatives from many traditions, including evangelical Christians.

**THE THEMES OF THE PARLIAMENT**

It is impossible to give here a detailed account of each plenary session, let alone the numerous significant lectures, panels, and so forth. But it is possible to report on some of the dominant themes that surfaced in various presentations throughout the week. One concern that weighed heavily on many a speaker’s heart was religiously incited violence: it was often repeated that roughly two-thirds of the world’s armed conflicts are fueled by religion (e.g., Muslim vs. Jew; Catholic vs. Protestant; Hindu vs. Sikh). The Parliament took as its mission the lofty task of bringing peace among the world’s religions.

This theme of peace is a cause Christians should be able to support, at least in principle. There is nothing within their faith that calls them to hostility or warfare, but rather to make peace (Matt. 5:9). However, their ability to jump on the bandwagon of peace that was launched at the Parliament is greatly hindered by the way this cause was exploited for the New Age agenda. In other words, the cause of religious warfare was frequently identified with *fundamentalism* — vaguely defined as the dogmatic belief that only one’s own religion is true (thus associating all adherents of exclusivistic faiths with such militant fundamentalists as the
Muslim Hezbollah). And the solution to religious conflict was often identified with unity among religions — vaguely defined as each religion accepting that, in some underlying sense, all religions are true.

Unity

In responding to Robert Müller’s plenary address on “Interfaith Harmony and Understanding,” Swami Ghahanananda, Vice President of the Ramakrishna Order, proclaimed:

We are obviously at the dawn of a New Age....Religions of the world are called upon to fulfill the needs and aspirations of the people of the New Age. Religions have to provide a vision of the unity of life and reality that reconciles the intellectual insights of science with the spiritual intuition of religion. In spite of parliaments and dialogues and talks about harmony, religion continues to be a major source of conflict in many countries which have pluralistic societies. This is because of a lack of a true vision of universality. In this context, I would like to place before you two models of universal religion developed by Swami Vivekananda: one model views universal religion as the sum total of all existing religions, each religion complimenting the others. The other model regards all the religions as manifestations of one eternal, universal religion which consists of the universal truths and laws of spiritual law. Whether or not we accept either of these models, we need a holistic vision of the religions of the world....This Parliament may not enact laws, but it can create a vision of unity. If the motto of the first Parliament was, “From dissension to harmony,” then let the motto of the present Parliament be, “From harmony to unity” [applause]. Let the holistic vision of religion emerge from our discussion. Let the 21st century see a religion where there will be no narrowness, bigotry, superstition, intolerance, violence, and disharmony. Harmony between religions, nations, and cultures can be promoted by emphasizing, not the differences that exist between them, but the essential oneness underlying them.

Another respondent to Müller, Dr. L. M. Singhvi, Jain scholar and Indian diplomat and parliamentarian, added these thoughts: “The success of this centennial succession lies in the ability of humankind everywhere to mobilize the moral will of mankind to give a new sense of direction and purpose, a new momentum to the concept of the inherent unity and togetherness of all religions and spiritual traditions in the common cause of building in the third millennium of the Gregorian calendar an enduring, eternal temple of the true togetherness of humankind.”

Swami Chidananda Saraswati, “one of Hinduism’s most senior and most respected monks,” affirmed on Tuesday night (August 31) that “there are not many religions, only one.”

The Rastafarians, in a musical performance, prayed: “Whatever we call your name…you answer to all of them.”

Hindu S. N. Subba Rao, head of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, proclaimed that if all religions are one, the next step is for us to say, “All religions are mine.” We should pray one another’s prayers, he added.

During the Parliament’s youth night, “The Next Generation,” the young presenters stated that they accept what Vivekananda said: “We believe not only in religious tolerance, but that all religions are true.”

One might have supposed that this belief in the fundamental unity of all religions was only the view of certain presenters and not the official position of the Parliament itself. However, this notion was dispelled on several occasions. For example, during Tuesday night’s plenary session on the “Inner Life,” the Parliament’s vice-chair and program chair, Jim Kenney, gave a brief exposition of the concept of the “Sacred Wheel” (he expounded on this more fully during a major presentation).

According to this metaphor, religion can be likened to a wheel, “the spokes representing the varieties of religious expression, the rim representing the level of most superficial involvement in one’s own tradition, the hub representing the shared heart of all religious wisdom.” At the spiritually immature level of the rim, Kenney explained, the differing concepts of God separating the world’s religions seem insurmountable. One sees one’s own religion as having an exclusive handle on truth. As one progresses down the “spoke” of his or her tradition toward the hub, however, one realizes that the language of all religion — including language about God — is symbolic. The more one moves down his or her spoke, the closer one draws to the other spokes (i.e., religions), until they all converge at the hub. What is at the hub? Kenney’s Zen master called it “the brilliant blue of empty sky.” It is “nothing but everything,” the common experience at the core of all religions.

Kenney observed that 100 years ago attendance at the first Parliament was a risky venture, because the “rim view” dominated the world. Over the past 100 years we’ve made the “dangerous and daunting journey down the spokes.” This does not mean that in the New Age we will get rid of the rim and have only one world religion, but rather we will recognize our unity in the midst of our diversity. Although this analogy is fundamentally flawed (as demonstrated below), the audience embraced it with joy.

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Antifundamentalism

Such stress on the fundamental unity of all religions naturally leads to antagonsism toward any exclusivist view of truth. “If the goal of religious unity is to be reached,” one speaker told the session on “Voices of Spirit and Tradition,” “people must be weaned of dogmatism.” For how can a pluralistic culture experience union in the divine, he asked us, unless we are weaned from the divisive doctrines of the divine?

Ananda W. P. Guruge, Buddhist respondent to Müller, expressed the sentiments of many at the Parliament when he affirmed:

We believe that religion has a contribution to make to the dignity and the decency of humankind. And there are two scourges that we have to be mindful of: there’s one category which could be called irreligion, nonreligion, or antireligion…we cannot allow religion to be debased by those who think that religion — which can make a wonderful contribution to the spiritual development of all of us — should be given a back seat in the society of humankind. The second, even worse, is the intolerance that would be marked by, whether you call it fanaticism, whether you call it extremism, or whether you call it fundamentalism, it has the same effect. These two, they may look different, but they have the same outcome. They make a mockery of religion, they make religion something that we cannot utilize….We have to start a struggle, and I can say this, that we Buddhists, with our traditions, working through….a vast number of national, international, and regional Buddhist organizations, we are ready to contribute our might, our share to this struggle, so that we all work together to establish the one ness of all religions — the ethical and the spiritual oneness of all religions — so that through religion, through our efforts, we ensure peace and tranquility, well-being and happiness for every man and child, in the world today and tomorrow.

A similar vein was struck in Rabbi A. James Rudin’s response to Gerald Barney’s keynote address. He observed that there are “two pincer movements” to Dr. Barney’s dream: antireligious people and religious extremists. Regarding the latter he commented that they are too concerned about preserving pure doctrine (“only my holy book is true”) and not concerned enough about solving the earth’s problems. Thus they are fearful of the 21st century. He concluded that in the 21st century, religious groups will have to join together to oppose both of these pincer movements “before they destroy us.”

L. M. Singhvi spoke of the desire for humankind to fulfill its positive civilizational destiny….

….without the trivializing and narrow-minded impediments which have often eclipsed and hamstrung the age-old vision of the world as one family….Let us not forget that our dream of togetherness and collaboration cannot be translated into living substance and reality unless we succeed in exorcising the malevolent ghosts of politics from the sacred precincts of religion and the haunting specter of religious fanaticism from the workaday arena of politics….It is crystal clear that the manifesto of this Parliament is to work for a rainbow unity of all the religions and traditions of the world and not to mandate any kind of monolithic uniformity. That is what the Indian ideal has always been and will always be. That accommodation of diversities has been, I believe, uniquely the genius of India….Perhaps India has something to offer in terms of its long and rich experience of cultural pluralism, interreligious understanding, and cooperation, irrespective of many difficult and traumatic circumstances that we have unfortunately faced. Perhaps we can still offer the fundamentalism of tolerance — the only fundamentalism today which humanity can countenance [applause]. (second emphasis added)

THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE PARLIAMENT

The plethora of lectures and activities on stage represented only one aspect of the Parliament. In formal closed-door meetings and in informal encounters and discussions, the vision of dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders was being advanced.

Informally, the long-range affects of the networking resulting from this vocation are difficult to calculate, but no doubt they will be more than we can imagine. Time and again throughout the hotel I overheard representatives from this publishing house establishing contact with that spiritual teacher, this New Age environmentalist enlisting the cooperation of that Catholic nun, and so forth.

The Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders met for three days in closed sessions at the Art Institute of Chicago. The trustees of the Parliament convened the Assembly “to foster future collaboration, to endorse a ‘Global Ethic’ statement, and to advise the trustees on common values and future projects. This body consisted of the 150 members chosen by the Council, the local host committees of the different traditions, and the cosponsors.”

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Due to protests from some members of the Assembly (see below), the Declaration of a Global Ethic — which was intended to be the crowning accomplishment of the Parliament — could only be heralded as “an initial declaration toward a global ethic.” All the same, it marked the first time in history that leaders of all the world’s major religions endorsed a common statement of ethics. Among the hundreds who signed the document were the Dalai Lama, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, and the Rev. Wesley Ariarajah, deputy general secretary of the World Council of Churches, representing most Protestant denominations. “In signing the declaration delegates were personally endorsing the document; their actions were not binding on their religious bodies. Nonetheless, participants hoped that the number, religious diversity and ‘moral credibility’ of those signing would lead to formal institutional recognition.”

The Global Ethic was primarily drafted by the renowned Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng, who spent more than a year crafting the 5,000-word document. In what was likely the best-attended nonplenary address during the entire week, Küng stated that there can be no new global order without a new global ethic. Nonetheless, the basis for this global ethic can already be found in the world’s religions. It is easier to agree on ethics than on doctrines, he stated. Unlike many speakers at the Parliament, Küng refused to call for a unity of religions, but only for peace, understanding, and a certain degree of cooperation.

According to the New York Times:

Much of the declaration restates the commandments not to kill, steal, lie or commit adultery, but does so in general terms of nonviolence; economic justice and respect for the environment; truthfulness in politics, culture and the media, and an end to sexual discrimination.

The declaration condemns genocide, torture, “ethnic cleansing” and the use of religion to stir hatred, but it avoids specific examples. It also avoids issues like euthanasia, abortion, and birth control.

It does not use the word “God,” coming closest in one reference to “Ultimate Reality,” a step necessitated, Father Küng said, to respect Buddhism and other faiths that recognize a spiritual dimension but not a personal divine creator.

Asked whether the demands of reaching consensus made the document too general to be meaningful, Father Küng replied, “We have here a minimum ethic,” a baseline to which all religions could hold themselves accountable.

As we saw in Part One, Robert Müller called for the establishment of a permanent Parliament of Religions as “the most important single result that could come out of this parliament.” Other leading participants echoed the same appeal, including the Dalai Lama.

Will this vision be realized? Time will tell. According to the Christian Century, “The council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions will continue to work under the guidance of a newly elected board of trustees....Efforts are being made to establish an international organization, though some forces in existing international interreligious bodies are reluctant to see a new structure emerge.”

THE FAILURE OF THE PARLIAMENT

The Parliament may ultimately succeed in its goal of catalyzing a world spiritual institution similar to the United Nations. But at the gathering in Chicago there was much to suggest failure.

As I sat alone at dinner after the opening session, the enthusiastic conversation on both sides of me centered on what was most striking about the event: all the speakers were saying the same thing. Whether Catholic, Buddhist, Native American, or Baha’i, all upheld such themes as the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. All speakers seemed to be reaching out in affirmation to the members of other faiths. Love and tolerance were triumphing over distrust and conflict. But on further observation this celebrated unity often proved to be chimerical.

Part of the illusion could be attributed to a general ignorance of what the various religions really believe. Many of the speakers sounded as though they accepted the religions of everyone else while in fact they were preaching their own distinctive doctrines and making the most of an evangelistic opportunity.

At several points the Parliament turned into a commercial for the Baha’is. For example, in a plenary session titled “Voices of Spirit and Tradition,” a Baha’i read from The Song of the Prophet, written by Baha’i founder Baha’u’llah. To most of the audience the reading sounded like an affirmation by God of His presence in all religions. But it was actually Baha’u’llah speaking, preaching classic Baha’i doctrine: just as God had been manifest to previous ages in Abraham, Jesus, and other
founders of world religions, so he was manifest to this age in Baha’u’llah: “This is the message for a new dawning….when my teachings shall unite the world.”

Given their commission to unite the world through Baha’u’llah’s teachings, the Parliament provided a missionary bonanza for Baha’is. They could sound ecumenical in ascribing value to all the world’s religions. In actuality they were only affirming those religions’ past value, while pointing to their own faith as the present fulfillment and replacement of all previous religions.

Another example: in one of the opening invocations Dr. Irfan Khan of the American Islamic College cried out to God in prayer that He would make all people servants of the one God in one united family. Though the prayer sounded great to the ecumenical mind of the Parliament, it could easily have been declaring nothing more than the ultimate Muslim goal of uniting all humanity under the banner of Islam.

Now, it could have been that Dr. Khan’s intentions were broader than this. But even if they were, does this really signal a breakthrough in interreligious relations? Islamicist Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in a symposium on “Religion and Violence,” “made the dismaying point that very little of the irenic things said by the genial Muslim presenters in the conference would be recognized in the countries of their origin.”

It was generally assumed at the Parliament that great breakthroughs in dialogue between religions were taking place all around us. And yet, as Buddhist interfaith worker Suwanda Suganarisi told The Toronto Star, except for the Christian delegates the theme often seemed to rather be monologue than dialogue. Religious groups boldly used the lecture opportunities to advertise the value of their own traditions. A small sampling: “Zoroastrianism: An Ancient Religion for Modern Man”; “Taoism: Ancient Wisdom for the Modern World”; “Bhakti Yoga — The Origin and Essence of All Religions”; “Ask — By All Means — What Jainism Can Do for You”; “How Hindu Thought Can Unite the Divided World”; “Unity [School of Christianity] Leaves No One Out.”

Dialogue was not the only ecumenical quality at lunchtime at the Parliament: even tolerance among the varied faithful was often noticeably absent. At times the intolerance was subtle and even humorous, such as when an Indian woman — unaware that she was being viewed on screen by thousands of participants in the spillover ballrooms — rolled her eyes at the sound of horns included in the Roman Catholic “Music of the Baroque.” At other times, such as during a presentation on the “Voices of the Dispossessed,” the animosity was frightening. Twice Hindus attempted to shout down Indian speakers — the first a Kashmiri and the second a Sikh from the Punjab — recounting atrocities suffered by their people at the hands of Hindus. Some of the Hindus even rushed toward the stage, where they were escorted out of the ballroom by police. In the second incident the entire meeting was brought to a stop, and the speaker was not allowed to continue, which provoked a fresh outbreak of protests from Sikhs in the audience. The shaken assemblage — some weeping over the apparent inability of religious people to get along with each other, even at a gathering such as this — linked arms and joined in a chorus of “We Shall Overcome.”

Rifts in the ecumenical spirit multiplied as the week progressed. The Orthodox Christian Host Committee dropped out of the Parliament because of the participation of “certain quasi-religious groups” — apparently neopagans — “with which Orthodox Christians share no common ground.” Buddhists expressed their dismay at being included in “one religion under God,” since they do not believe in God. Four Jewish organizations withdrew their cosponsorship of the Parliament because Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam was allowed to speak at the invitation of the African-American Host Committee.

The division among the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders over the Global Ethic document arose because some representatives felt it was too Christian and Western in orientation (e.g., using biblical language in forbidding murder and stating the Golden Rule). Though the Assembly had no authority to pass resolutions, they did so anyway. One resolution condemned a 1493 decision by the papacy to divide territories in the Americas among European Catholic monarchs, asserting — over the protests of Catholics and others present — that this resulted in the genocide of 145 million indigenous people.

All of this discord only demonstrated the implausibility of the goal: how could the world’s religions ever come together on their own? Wouldn’t such a linkage only be possible if dissidents were somehow forcibly removed from the equation?

A “FUNDAMENTALIST” RESPONSE

Although I would normally identify myself as an evangelical Christian rather than a fundamentalist, it seemed clear that evangelical Christians were included in many of the derisive references to fundamentalists made during the Parliament. Therefore, in the interest of not only evangelical Christians but all religious people who Parliamentarians would label fundamentalists, I present the following response.

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What Was Good about the Parliament

As A. James Rudin observed, we all live in an increasingly multireligious and multiethnic society — we can never go back. As members of various faiths live and work side by side, the value of tolerance — respecting the other’s right to worship according to the dictates of his or her own conscience — should be self-evident.

The Parliament of the World’s Religions upheld several principles that should be valued by all religious people. One example, noted above, was its resounding call for an end to religiously fomented war.

There are common ethical teachings (e.g., the Golden Rule) in the world’s religions that can serve as a framework for interreligious relations. They can also provide a base for a united response to many of the crises of our time. Thus, the Declaration of a Global Ethic is a praiseworthy product of the Parliament.

The Parliament is also to be commended for bringing the people of the world together to tell their stories, share their cultures, and seek understanding of one another. The plenary session on the “Voices of the Dispossessed” — which related the plights of displaced peoples on every continent — appealed to moral sensibilities deeply imbedded in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures.

Unfortunately, whatever was good about the Parliament was overshadowed by its dominant emphasis on unity and communion among the world’s religions. The assertion that all faiths worship the same God is factually indefensible, and the unity advocated at the Parliament would violate the integrity of many of the religions represented there.

The Ultimate Irony: Putting God Aside for the Sake of Religious Unity

“We are all one under our God,” said Dr. Leon Finney of the Apostolic Faith Church. But many at the Parliament did not believe in only one god; others did not believe in any god at all. And those who do agree that there is one God cannot agree on whether God is a He or a She or an It, on what this God is like, or on what He/She/It has done in history for humanity’s salvation — if anything.

Faced with this Babel of religious beliefs, Robert Müller offered the following advice: “Let all the religions work on what they have in common. And what divides them, put aside for the very end. If you want to have an agreement whether to believe in God, in several gods, or in no god you will never get an agreement because there’s no commonality. So leave these aside, and take the subjects which we have in common,” which he proceeded to describe as ethical concerns.

The problem with Müller’s suggestion is that a religion’s belief about God or Ultimate Reality is its very heart and soul. It is the goal of its discipline and the focus of its devotion, determining everything else about its faith and practice. If religions differ as to the nature of Ultimate Reality, any commonalities they may have in ethical teachings are merely incidental. As was acknowledged above, such commonalities can serve as a basis for cooperation on certain pragmatic issues, but they cannot provide a sufficient foundation for erecting “the enduring eternal temple of the true togetherness of humankind” spoken of by L. M. Singhvi. They do not provide justification for praying each other’s prayers or for affirming that all religions are true.

The Sacred Wheel: All Religions Are True, but Some Are More True than Others

To overcome the obstacle to religious unity posed by conflicting conceptions of God, Jim Kenney presented his analogy of the Sacred Wheel. This analogy, however, is an insult to any religious person who does not hold to a pantheistic (“God is everything”) world view. In a pantheistic scheme, God is formless and thus can only be experienced; He cannot be conceptualized. Thus, in this view, all religious language is symbolic of the ineffable mystical experience that lies at the heart of all religion. On the other hand, in a theistic world view God has definite attributes that can be known. Thus — though symbolism does play a role in religious language — the differing conceptions of God that separate the world’s religions are very real.

By stating that as people progress down the “spokes” of their religions they will realize those differences seen at the “rim” are not insurmountable after all, pantheists like Kenney are in effect telling theists that they know what actually constitutes maturity on the theists’ own spiritual path. This position arrogantly dismisses the testimony of such theists as evangelical Christians, who affirm that as they grow in Christian experience the distinctive doctrines of their faith become more profound and literal to them, not less so.11

Kenney’s analogy is flawed because, while theists are supposed to progress from the rim where they view differently from other religions down to the hub where they reach the common religious experience of “empty blue sky,” pantheists, such as his
Zen Master, are already speaking of God as “empty blue sky” from the level of the rim. In other words, the alleged experience of the hub matches the pantheistic “rim” conception of God. Since the pantheists’ religious language does not suffer from the same problem that the theists’ allegedly does, it becomes clear that the analogy is actually a pantheistic model that attempts to subsume theism into itself.

I pointed this out to Kenney in a discussion after the Tuesday evening session, and he commented that it was an interesting critique that he’d never heard before. Nonetheless, he presented the analogy again, unchanged, in a major presentation three days later.

**When the “Tolerant” Are Less Tolerant than the “Intolerant”**

When spokespersons for the Parliament ask us to accept that all religions are true, they go beyond asking us to show tolerance, compassion, understanding, and respect to the followers of other religions (things which most evangelical Christians are motivated to do). Rather, they are asking us to commit to a particular metaphysical view on no other grounds than that it has become the politically correct view.

This metaphysical view is a religious relativism which states that truth is partially grasped by all religions but cannot be fully (exclusively) possessed by any. Such a view of truth presupposes that a special, uniquely authoritative revelation by God cannot or has not been given. Thus, it excludes at the outset the claims that provide the historic foundation for theistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. On the other hand, it fits in quite well with pantheism or even panentheism (God is in everything), since the underlying oneness of all reality in pantheistic/panentheistic systems allows for all religions to have a partial but incomplete grasp on truth. The outcome of all this is that if a doctrinally orthodox Jew, Christian, or Muslim buys into the form of relativism advocated at the Parliament, he or she will be switching — at least implicitly — from a theistic to a pantheistic or panentheistic world view; which is to say, switching religions. This can be done while still professing to represent one’s native faith. 12

Relativism is only one of many possible ways of viewing reality, and it is by no means a proven view; in fact, it has been shown to have serious flaws. 13 Were tolerance and cooperation toward productive ends the true objectives of the Parliament? Or was its actual agenda, as I submitted in Part One of this article, a binding together of the world’s religions through the glue of New Age pantheism (the “new universalism” spoken of by Robert Müller)? If the Parliament’s interfaith leaders want us to believe the former was/is their goal, they should respect the fact that any given way of viewing reality, including their own world view, excludes other ways of viewing reality. They should appeal for tolerance of differences without demanding acceptance of differing views as legitimate.

As it stands, much of the rhetoric heard at the Parliament can only be interpreted as threatening to fundamentalists. L. M. Singhvi’s assertion that the “fundamentalism of tolerance” is “the only fundamentalism today which humanity can countenance” graphically illustrates that a “fundamentalism” (i.e., a belief system which condemns other belief systems as false) of some sort is unavoidable. It is clear from the overall content of his speech that Singhvi equates tolerance with accepting “the inherent unity and togetherness of all religions.”

The fundamentalism of tolerance is just as dogmatic as any other fundamentalism, only it is deceptive in its profession of tolerance. Actually, it is only tolerant of other expressions of the same world view (a Jain relativist being tolerant of a Jewish relativist is not much different than a Presbyterian being tolerant of a Methodist — they may differ as to certain details of religion but they agree as to the larger picture). It may actually prove to be less tolerant, since it does not seem to recognize the right of others to reject its relativistic view.

To tie the attainment of world peace to a universal acceptance of the fundamentalism of tolerance is to foist yet another destructive division upon humankind. Those who are peddling this “new universalism” are ready to sacrifice any serious concern for truth on the altar of an expedient but artificial religious unity. If the antifundamentalist sentiment so powerfully evident at the Parliament continues to spread throughout society, those who the “politically correct” label “fundamentalists” can expect increasing opposition and even persecution, perhaps one day from the government itself.

**NOTES**

2. Ibid., 60.

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Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299
6 Lefebure, 889.
9 Lefebure, 889.
10 Ibid., 887.
12 It is clear that many of the professing Christians at the Parliament had indeed made the switch. I will provide examples and commentary in the JOURNAL’s Spring 1994 Viewpoint column.