

The Young at the 2009 Parliament of World's Religions:

A Reflection on Educating Religious Leaders for a Multi-Religious World

Kyeongil Jung

Doctoral Student, Union Theological Seminary, New York

The Fifth Parliament of World's Religions was convened in Melbourne, Australia, on December 3-9, 2009. It was an interreligious *kairos* moment in which some six thousands attendees from more than one hundred countries and two hundred religious traditions dialogued, prayed, and acted together. The theme of the 2009 Parliament was "Make a World of Difference: Hearing each other, Healing the earth." As the theme implied, the central focus of the 2009 Parliament was mainly on socioethical issues to which both the religious and secular should respond, including "healing the Earth with care and concern," "reconciling with Indigenous peoples," "overcoming poverty in a patriarchal world," "securing food and water for all people," "building peace in the pursuit of justice," "creating social cohesion in village and city," and "sharing wisdom in the search for inner peace." In a world where religions are accused of being responsible for religiously ignited and sanctioned violence and where hope is often considered a mere cliché or euphoric rhetoric, participants at the 2009 Parliament proved that religion is not only a problem but also a promise of hope for a better world. It was indeed a global interreligious fest of *many faiths* and *one hope*.

One of distinctive characteristics of the 2009 Parliament was the young generation's active and committed participation in interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Young people were present in every session and in every event throughout the Parliament days. It was hopeful and promising to see them sharing with one another their thoughts, concerns, spiritualities, and activities. The Parliament's

consideration and support of youth were visible and tangible. At night, on December 7, “The Youth Plenary” was held where young religious activists came together to share their socially engaged faiths, their dreams, and their practices. And in many events, big or small, young people served as panel discussants or engaging audience, in which they were always encouraged by their older generation to raise their energetic and enthusiastic voices. There was no hierarchy but hospitality for young people.

Among the many youth-centered events and programs, perhaps the most systematically organized program was a five-day seminar on “Educating Religious Leaders for a Multi-Religious World.” The participants consisted primarily of over one hundred students and faculties from fifteen seminaries and theological schools in the United States, together with many attentive or active participants from various faiths who were interested in interreligious or multi-religious education. The program coordinated by Dr. Paul F. Knitter, the Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, was made possible thanks mainly to the financial support by the Henry Luce Foundation. All students and professors were fully funded by the foundation, including expenses for travel, lodging, meals, etc (While participating in the eye-opening seminar and the Parliament, I as an Asian student came to ponder the possibility of inviting theological and religious students not only from North America but also from other continents in order to make the program more *interreligious* and *international*. Such possibilities will be proposed to the planner for the next Parliament.).

It should be noted that this seminary program was in preparation well before the Parliament itself began. Each school offered a regular course that dealt with religious diversity, interreligious dialogue, or multi-religious education before (or, for some schools, after) the Parliament. In the pre-Parliament seminars or meetings, students were asked to provide succinct and clear statements to the following four core questions: Why is multi-religious education necessary in the seminaries and theology programs? What are the resources and obstacles to multi-religious education in your own tradition? What are the virtues and skills for multi-religious education? What are practical initiative and examples of multi-

religious education? In addition to these questions, students at the seminar had a final question to answer: What have we learned in the Parliament and what next steps we hope to take?

Each seminar, which dealt with one of the five analytical questions, consisted of presentations by three or four students from different schools followed by small group discussions and the plenary forum. These group discussions were a unique opportunity for young students to meet and dialogue with other future religious leaders. Through this face-to-face interaction with one another, the students could deepen and widen their understanding of religious diversity and interreligious relations. In a certain way, the program itself was already a form of interreligious dialogue since the participants were not only Christians but also Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or double-belongers. In some aspects, it reflected the increasing presence of non-Christian students in Christian education institutions in the United States.

The topics for the seminar covered theological, scriptural, and ethical aspects of religious diversity. Since all the students in the seminar were graduate students, presentations and discussions showed high academic quality. Yet, at the same time, the approach to the topics was down-to-earth and practical, rather than theoretical. Students were encouraged to bring their own experiences and understandings of the multi-religious reality. One of the discussion topics was particularly practical in terms of its possible application to everyday situations. Students were asked: “A Danish cartoonist who drew the controversial caricature of the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, which hurt Muslims’ feelings, is invited to a press conference in your community, where Muslims are present as a significant minority. As a religious leader, how will you respond to the situation?” Students and faculty had a heated discussion to find the most desirable solution that can preserve the freedom of expression as well as respects the faith and feelings’ of Muslims.

Along with the five-day seminar, students attended various sessions and presentations according to their particular interests and expectations. Since almost six hundred seminars and forums were offered during the Parliament days, it was pleasant but difficult to choose which seminar to attend. Yet, because of the limitation, it became a delightful routine to share with one another what they learned from

attending various seminars. Perhaps, the most important learning for the young people would be their direct and personal encounters with spiritual and social leaders most of whom they had known before through books or media. It was an enlightening and deeply moving experience to meet living saints who lived what they said and believed.

Another informal but important achievement made by young men and women at the Parliament was intra-and interreligious friendship among the future multi-religious leaders. Talking, listening, eating, sleeping, and hanging out together for seven days, the young came to realize their differences as well as their sameness, both of which are precious resources for mutual understanding and transformation. It should be highlighted that young people at the Parliament started interreligious friendship in their religious formation periods, while many of existing religious leaders joined interreligious movements after they shaped their religious identity in a monoreligious environment. That is why the future landscape of interreligious dialogue and cooperation will be more colorful and lively.

The interreligious kairos ended with many challenges still to be met in each participant's everyday world. Young people returned to each other's own world, with a transformed self. Yet, the online social networks, such as Facebook, MySpace, or Peacenext (<http://peacenext.org>) that was created by the Parliament as an interreligious online community, will enable them to continue to contact and communicate with one another despite their physical distances. Leaving Melbourne, we promised one another to meet again five years later at the Sixth Parliament, then as young pastors, rabbis, imams, monks and nuns, or scholars of religions. This post-Parliament intra-and interreligious friendship among religious leaders-to-be will indeed be a great resource to make a world of difference.