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The Human Bazaar: From Pain to Heroism

Brian Carwana¹

The Parliament of World Religions, coming to Toronto this November 1–7, is a rare opportunity. The event will attract approximately 10,000 attendees, tackle serious issues, bring globally recognized speakers, and present the widest array of religious traditions that you will ever encounter under one roof. While it will address important topics in ways that are both heart-rending and inspiring, let me begin by simply highlighting the first thing you may notice upon arriving – the parliament is, in the best sense of the term, a human bazaar.

For seventeen years, I have worked at the Encounter World Religions Centre, an educational organization promoting religious literacy. In my work, I bring thousands annually to mosques, synagogues, and temples and hence am very accustomed to diverse spaces, people, and practices. Yet despite this background, I had never encountered anything quite like what I experienced at the 2015 Parliament of World Religions in Salt Lake City. It was the most diverse human gathering I have ever seen.

It happened as soon as I entered the foyer. There were Tibetan Buddhist monks creating a sand mandala that they made over several days, only to then intentionally and ritually destroy it, demonstrating viscerally the impermanence that marks all life. Behind the monks was a makeshift indoor Jain temple with a priest you could sit with, join for meditation, or ask questions. Jains teach radical nonviolence and significantly influenced Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy. As I looked around, there were Hindu sadhus (renunciates) covered in face paint and sporting long dreadlocks that had never been cut. I had read about the sadhus for two decades but never encountered them in any North American setting. I also encountered New Age adepts wearing elaborate outfits, several dressed as angels with wings on their backs, and the widest variety of Indigenous peoples from various corners of the world, many wearing traditional garments and headdresses.

Even at this superficial visual level, one could not help but be humbled by the sheer variety of human cultures and ways of living that exist on this planet. Given how inundated we are with Western culture (from capitalism to corporate media and Hollywood), it was eye-opening to be reminded how contingent even the dominant form of Western living is and how many alternatives exist.

But the parliament's real depth goes far beyond the visual (though visuals matter). It is a rich opportunity to learn, to grow, to be confronted, and to participate. The event highlights a theme each day. As I am involved in planning the day at the Toronto parliament devoted to Hate, Violence, and War, let me use this single day to give you a taste of what the parliament offers.

Opening the day is Payam Akhavan. Akhavan was born in Iran and was a child when his Baha'i family fled the country as their faith made them outcasts in the Ayatollah

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Khomeini's new regime. Akhavan tells the story of a sixteen-year-old girl who wrote a school essay on religious freedom that criticized the new government. The authorities got wind of the essay, arrested this teenage girl, and had her publicly executed. Akhavan describes how at her execution she smiled defiantly at her executioner, an act Akhavan says changed his life. Driven to tackle injustice, he became a famed human rights lawyer, credited with a key role in founding the International Criminal Court at The Hague. Akhavan's 2017 Massey Lectures are a moving and powerful tribute about our duty to fight for justice, and he will make an excellent opening speaker for the morning session.

Later that morning, attendees will hear from Mariatu Kamara. Like Akhavan, Kamara is a refugee living in Canada, having fled civil war in Sierra Leone. Kamara's story is harrowing: many of her family and friends were butchered, she was raped at age twelve, and then her abductors cut off both her hands. Somehow, Kamara refused to be defeated. She managed to get to a camp, received medical help, and eventually was accepted into Canada. Now thirty-one years old, she has written a book about her experiences, has toured with UNICEF and Free the Children, and is currently pursuing studies at the University of Toronto. Kamara will give us a glimpse of war, of terror, but also of heroism and hope despite great loss.

Also speaking that morning is Dr. Izzeldin Abuellaish, a Palestinian doctor and peace activist. Abuellaish has been nominated multiple times for the Nobel Peace Prize and would be a worthy winner. He grew up in a refugee camp in Gaza, among the most overcrowded and poorest places on earth. His family had once been fairly well off, but lost their lands in the 1948 war and had become poor (ironically, their old property now lies in the hands of Ariel Sharon's family). Abuellaish was good at school, however, and earned a scholarship to study medicine in Egypt. He thrived and eventually received further degrees in England and at Harvard.

He then became the first Palestinian doctor appointed at an Israeli hospital. He crossed the Gaza-Israel border every Monday morning, which he describes as a multihour process that degraded the crossers' humanity. He then worked at the hospital Monday to Friday as an obstetrician, delivering babies (some Muslim babies, but mostly Jewish babies). On Friday, Abuellaish went back through the border (another few hours) to be with his family on the weekend. Abuellaish found medicine to be a rare place where Palestinians and Israelis forgot any hostility. When patients came, no one asked what ethnicity or religion they were, nor did one investigate the backgrounds of other doctors and nurses – the patients were just people and the medical team, whatever its composition, rallied to provide care. Abuellaish made many Jewish friends and became a known peace activist both in Israel and abroad.

In 2008, Abuellaish's wife died of cancer. As a single parent of eight children, he could no longer spend the work week away from his family and hence he accepted a position in Toronto. Before he left, however, conflict erupted between the Palestinians and the Israelis and, even though his home was supposed to be a safe place (known to the Israeli army), two Israeli rockets hit his home and killed three of his daughters and a niece. Abuellaish responded to his horror not with rage or hopelessness but by writing a book titled *I Shall Not Hate*. He speaks around the world, with the speaking fees going to his foundation that educates girls and young women from the Middle East.

Other speakers that morning will arrive from around the world. Sakeena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghan Institute for Learning, will talk about her grassroots organization that brings education and health care information to women and children and other marginalized

Afghani populations. Swami Agnivesh, who has fought slavery and opposed Hindu fundamentalism in India, will also speak, as will two representatives from ICAN, winners of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize for the group's advocacy work for nuclear disarmament. The speakers will vary by gender, race, ethnicity, age, and other characteristics and draw on experiences from around the world. To hear about all of this in one morning is a fantastic opportunity to learn, to see with new eyes, and to hear with different ears.

The other days will be similarly impressive. One will be devoted to Justice, and will feature a gay Syrian refugee who fled persecution and a Latino scholar-activist. Other days will focus on Women and Girls, Climate, and NextGen. The opening day will tackle Indigenous issues, the only appropriate starting point in the Canadian context. That day's program is being planned by an Indigenous Working Group and populated by Indigenous speakers, both renowned and lesser known, of varied geographical and spiritual backgrounds. Many attendees may hear more Indigenous voices in that one day than cumulatively in their lifetime, including Inuit and Métis voices, residential school survivors, accomplished Indigenous authors, youth living in urban settings, and more. The event promises to be both informative and inspiring.

Famous personalities are only part of the event. There will be a few hundred smaller sessions where people from across the world are invited to submit proposals that address the parliament's key themes. You can hear from activists, from members of small faith communities that you may know little about, and from thinkers and academics. In addition, there will be activities that attend to other aspects of our being by incorporating ritual performances and having an evening focused on sacred music. In Salt Lake, the sacred music event was held at the Mormon Tabernacle and was mesmerizing as each community put forward some of its most talented performers in sacred dance, drumming, and song.

Another regular feature of the parliaments is the Sikh lunch. Sikhs serve food to everyone who comes into their gurudwaras (temples). This display of kindness and hospitality is a religious requirement set down by the movement's early leaders. Feeding people demonstrates *sewa* or service, and having everyone sit and eat together was also intended to counter the caste system – food is perhaps the most pervasive way that caste is enforced as it delineates whom one eats with, who can prepare food, etc. This centuries-long Sikh practice is carried out in every gurudwara today; hence young Sikhs grow up both being served and volunteering to serve in kind. The Sikhs bring this practice to the parliament by providing free lunches every day to every single person who wants one. It often amounts to between five and seven thousand lunches each day, financed by Sikh benefactors and staffed by Sikh volunteers who cook, serve, and clean. In a world where there is so much distrust and enmity, this simple act of amazing generosity makes a powerful statement.

The 2018 Parliament of World Religions is unlike anything else you will ever see. You can have great conversations over your free lunch or after a talk, look through an extensive program to choose what you want to attend, and hear from people whose backgrounds and life stories are varied, complex, and different from your own. At times you will hear of great pain and at other times you will be uplifted by genuine heroes. I heartily encourage you to consider setting aside the week (or attending for a day) as an excellent opportunity to learn, hope, and grow. A week of educational and spiritual riches awaits.