

The Parliament event will also serve as the focal point for a preparatory process, which will plant the seeds of the post-Parliament legacy. This effort will include reaching out to religious and spiritual communities to strengthen reflection on the importance of interreligious dialogue and community building in Barcelona. In part, this will be accomplished by organizing a number of pre-Parliament events aimed at the general public, and encouraging joint endeavors by particular communities such as exchanges and twinnings, to be encouraged and facilitated by the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia. All of these activities will be conducted in conjunction with the Universal Forum of Cultures – Barcelona 2004. The Universal Forum of Cultures is a 141-day international forum with over 40 congresses that will consider the themes of conditions for peace, cultural diversity and sustainable development. The 2004 Parliament event will bring the unique perspectives of religion and spirituality to the Forum.

All this preparation work will be displayed during the week of the Parliament of the World's Religions. Barcelona will be proudly showing the world its achievements as a plural community. It will be like a spiritual coming of age.

Editors' note: this is the first in a series of articles continuing over the next three issues of the journal, focusing on the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona, Spain.

believer. Catholics are now coming to terms with the idea of not being alone in the religious arena, and are sensitive to the need for fruitful patterns of interaction between traditions. There is finally an ever more tangible atmosphere of both ethical confusion and spiritual search. The so-called “value crisis” is deeply felt in many sectors of Catalan society. One could say that we have moved from a premodern to a postmodern frame of mind in a matter of decades. But at the same time there are many clear signs of dissatisfaction with prevailing quasi-nihilistic trends. While spiritual principles of whatever variety are often surrendered for the sake of accommodation with the mainstream, many people are actively looking for better-grounded approaches to life. Very often the search takes form in social engagement, with a very prominent “anti-globalization” movement as just the tip of the iceberg. But spiritual search is also an important item on the agenda, even if sometimes it is articulated in non-conventional, even secularized, terms. This makes the Parliament experience all the more relevant even to those outside traditional religious communities.

Growing up

All these elements are, in fact, already mirrored in the existing local interreligious movement. Immigration, together with the modern global situation, have made interreligious efforts seem necessary even to the average citizen and to the overtly non-religious, a situation that was unthinkable only fifteen years ago. Most religious minorities, whether or not they are linked to migration processes, are involved in interreligious work. Catholic institutions and individuals have often been the first ones in a local community to raise the issue and foster action. The movement is perhaps weakest in involving those who consistently hold some sort of spiritual values, but feel that this has nothing to do with formal religion, and are not therefore inclined to play the interreligious game.

One should not, however, lose sight of the fact that our local interreligious movement is rather young. We think we are moving in the right direction, but we need to widen the circle and help the child turn into an adult by a symbolic rite of passage such as the Parliament event. We need a rite of passage because we must somehow break with the past. Our more distant and our more recent past was in many respects not very conducive to dialogue. Two facts are particularly relevant: according to textbooks (and textbooks shape the collective unconscious), Catalonia and Spain as we know them were born against the Muslim world; and for three quarters of the twentieth century, religious communities other than Catholic suffered discrimination and even outright persecution.

Before, during and after

During the Parliament, local religious communities and interreligious initiatives will be sharing their stories, concerns, debates and practices. A host of issues will likely turn up: including those related to being a young community, to the traditional majority’s understanding of the perspectives of the minority, and to life in a society that is a bit afraid of the public dimension of religions will likely turn up. But participants will also learn from other experiences, other contexts, other failures and successes. In many respects, the Parliament can be like a school. Somehow, participating in the event should become a turning point in the religious and interreligious itineraries of Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain.

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A Rite of Passage
What Will the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions Mean for Barcelona?

Francesc Rovira

Next year, between 7 and 13 July, the fourth Parliament of the World's Religions will take place in Barcelona, under the theme "Pathways to Peace: the Wisdom of Listening, the Power of Commitment." Barcelona will provide a rather different environment – in terms of religious atmosphere, social reality and recent history – from its 1993 Chicago and 1999 Cape Town predecessors. New pathways to peace for the world are hidden in Barcelona, waiting to be explored.

Barcelona is the capital city of Catalonia, a distinctive area within Spain that has its own language, Catalan, and its own history, even from a religious point of view. Barcelona and Catalonia do not fit exactly into the stereotype of a conservative Catholic Spain. Our society has the imprint of a liberal Catholic tradition, which opened eagerly to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. There is also an emergent reaction against "National-Catholicism," which sought to dominate all of Spain's spiritual life during Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975). Both developments have contributed to the marked process of secularization that has taken place over the last 30 years. Now we have a society in which a majority of opinion leaders identify themselves either as non-believers or as "cultural Christians."

So, one may wonder, why is Barcelona hosting the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions? There are a number of factors that are currently altering our society's self-perception in terms of religion and spirituality. A new self-understanding is being shaped, and perhaps there is no better time for the Parliament to help us find the right pathways.

A New Landscape

Immigration is one important element in our evolving religious landscape. The immigration rate in Catalonia has increased from around 1% (out of 6 million residents) to well over 5% in the last ten years. Some of these new citizens are Muslims who do not wish to give up their religious identity, even if that entails facing some difficulty at times. Others come from predominantly Christian countries where religious observance is much more widespread and visible. Still others come from a variety of backgrounds, with a growing presence of Sikh, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu communities. The secular and Catholic majorities are beginning to realize that these communities have come to stay and that we need better understanding. On the other hand, minority communities are striving for social recognition and, more generally, for a more positive approach to religious diversity and to religion itself.

Another element affecting this evolving landscape is the growing awareness on the part the local Catholic Church that it is not the sole religion present and active in the spiritual life of our country. Many Catholics are quickly realizing that bigger size does not mean more rights or greater dignity. In recent years, the Catholic Church has been through a rather successful process of redefining its role in society, but so far the envisioned partner has mainly been the non-