

PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS 2009
Held in Melbourne 3 - 9 December

MINI CONGRESS IN MELBOURNE
Rohana Fraval reports

From early February, excitement was building up in Melbourne as we were about to host five thousand people from all denominations and spiritual beliefs. Also members from the World Subud Association (WSA) and World Subud Council (WSC) were planning to attend en masse!

Every month leading up to the great gathering, pre parliament events were held all over Melbourne. The church leaders got involved as did the Muslim and Jew, Sikh and other faith based communities. If this was anything to go by, we were in for a real multi-faith treat.

On the 30th of November, Osanna Vaughn, our WSA chairlady arrived in Melbourne. Amalia Rasheed, the WSA External Relations Coordinator followed the next day. They were participating in the 2nd meeting of the "Coalition in support of a UN Decade for Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace", which WSA had been asked to join and which met at the Holy Cross in Templestowe.

Soon after this, all our other international members descended on Melbourne. We had Alexandra Asseily, Sharifin Gardiner, Sharif and Tuti Horthy from the UK, Simon Guerrand (of Guerrand Hermes Foundation) and Liliane Tavakilian the Committee Councillor from France (and my dear friend from my early days in Paris), Garrett Thompson, his wife Elena and children, Scherto Gill and her son Toto, and Patrice Brodeur from Canada.

Murray Clapham and I, being members of the host country, had to get our act together. Whilst Murray hosted Sharifin, I had Osanna staying with me. This meant leaving very early in the morning to meet the rest of the gang at the Crowne Plaza for latihan at 8.00 a.m. We started in Amalia's room but as the numbers increased we felt we had to move.

The men managed to secure Simon's suite of rooms for extra latihan space. We ladies then followed and latihan in comfort. As soon as latihan was over, we walked the long walk to the Exhibition and Convention Centre for the 9.30 a.m. sessions.

Just try and picture the milling throngs of devout and passionate people preparing to project their beliefs and experiences on those interested enough to listen. People like me went out of curiosity and a desire to learn what these different faiths stood for.

On the first day of Parliament, the welcome address to the many participants gave us a taste of the enormity of relations with other faiths. The theme of the gathering was "Make a world of difference, Hearing each other, Healing the earth."

As is the tradition in Australia, the Aboriginal elders welcomed the participants to the Parliament. The official opening of the Parliament harnessed the emotions and multi-faith devotions in the sacred songs, music and dance. It raised our awareness to the differences and similarities of the varied paths we walk in our search for that feeling of completeness.

Apart from Subud, there were other spiritual teachings that we were keen to understand. The interreligious dialogues to promote peace in the world, address climate change and over consumption appealed to me. There were sessions on compassion, the role of women in conflict resolution, and, most of all, peace initiatives.

There were youth activities, dances and passionate speeches for changes in the policies and the way the affluent countries deal with poverty and ignorance. Topics such as Healing through Art and Music, Strangers becoming Neighbours, Sharing Wisdom and Fostering Peace, The Road to Copenhagen - Is Climate Change the New Slavery, made me wish I did not have to choose to attend just one session, but be able to listen to all the discussions.

I did not know the Unitarian Universalists have their church in Melbourne. The inspiring hope behind this movement which started in 1553 was to unite the Christian, Jews and Muslims in peace. The founder was burnt at the stake for 'denying the Trinity'. One of the main themes of this gathering was to promote and nurture religious tolerance for philosophies we do not understand. How do you proceed with people of different opinions. How often have we clashed in Subud too.

Spiritual evolution and the development of consciousness has been the vision of many leaders. There has always been the hope that truth and harmony would nurture tolerance towards our differences, building love.

On the first day, Friday 4 December, Osanna and I decided to attend a seminar on Reverence for the Virgin Mary and Jesus in Islam. This really intrigued me. In Christianity, Jesus is the son of God. In Islam He is the son of Mary, a holy child born without marriage as decreed by God – the Almighty said "BE" and it is! There is tremendous respect for Jesus and Mary in the Qur'an.

As a Subud member I feel I am open and liberal minded. Yet I felt we need complete humility. We are not the only ones with the latihan. People who evoked feelings of compassion also awakened feelings of love, peace and harmony. The power of listening as a sacred art and a spiritual practice that transforms all relationships was made abundantly clear.

There were several youth projects. "Young people around the world require relevant ways to explore their spirituality, connect with their inner strength and resources and acquire practices which will sustain them in developing their true potential."

Young people from around the world were making a difference by getting their voices heard. One of the youth I met was a very young Jewish musician who played the Sitar at the opening ceremony. We sat on the floor of the dining hall and talked about his passion for music and how it could help heal and bring peace, be it in a small way.

One of the sessions I attended dealt with bringing harmony and healing to the Aboriginal youth in Melbourne. Reg Blows is an Elder, married to a lady from the Wurrundjeri tribe. He runs a healing centre in Thornbury in Melbourne called the Maya Healing Centre. I visited the centre twice and was impressed with the way Indigenous youth are treated and listened to.

Every country brought its issues to the Melbourne Parliament to be heard. Indonesia has problems with religious radicalism. Non Islamic communities are displaced and disadvantaged. Anand Krishna raised our awareness of religious discrimination practiced in some of the islands of Indonesia, especially Sumatra. There is a grassroots movement to raise the awareness of such issues, globally.

One of the most enjoyable sessions was a dance recital of the story of Rama and Sita from the Ramayana. The artists were communicating love, peace, truth and non violence through the media of dance, music and drama. The sacred dancing was highly professional and the little boy with a big tail was cast perfectly as Hanuman, the Monkey God. This was a good way for youth to be involved in peace through traditional classical dancing.

Another amazing presentation was by three powerful women, who had taken on the task of counteracting the rebel instigated killings in their respective countries, namely Philippines and Rwanda, Africa, where children are taken as warriors. Deep conflicts cannot be healed overnight. How do you forgive the tyrants who perpetrated the genocides? There is nothing more powerful than an idea, whose time has come. Women are generally undervalued and marginalized in conflict resolution. So one of these women took on the task of approaching the rebel leader in the Sierra Leone conflict. His aggressiveness shifted as he thought she looked like his mother! So bravely and peacefully, she was able to have dialogue with him and reduce the violence and child killings.

Here is another example of peaceful intervention. Thousands of women, just ordinary mothers, grandmothers, aunts and daughters, both Muslim and Christians staged a silent protest against the cruelty of warlords, outside the Presidential Palace in Liberia. This brought about a resolution towards peaceful talks which had stalled.

Women being part of conflict resolution are motivated by faith and see themselves as resolvers and not victims. They are able to rise above the conflicts and begin the healing process by peaceful means.

On the last day of the Melbourne Parliament, Subud made a presentation to the world. Murray Clapham chaired the meeting and introduced Osanna Vaughn, the Chairlady of the World Subud Association. As the meeting progressed, there were stunning pictures of Subud past and present shown on a large screen.

Osanna gave a broad explanation about Subud and the words Susila, Budhi and Dharma. She talked of the process of the latihan and its potential impact in the world: if we allow our gifts and talents to emerge and then put them into action, it is an opportunity to develop ourselves and contribute to the world we live in. So our worship consists in two parts – the exercise of surrendering and letting go in the latihan, and the expression of who we come to be in our daily lives. The diversity of the human world needs to be celebrated and, out of commonality, new things arise.

Sharif talked about the early days of Subud and how it spread all over the world.

Tuti hesitantly spoke about Bapak and how he first received the revelation. She spoke about Bapak being "illuminated like daylight". She said that it felt like Bapak was "given an instruction manual for not only this world, but beyond. It was through his faith that he was able to receive this latihan". She spoke about sharing aspirations and healing the earth as we are able to harness our emotions.

Sharif continued and explained that Bapak was told that this experience was to be passed on to whoever asked for it and will receive exactly what he had originally received. The result of Bapak's experience and the receiving of the latihan meant that hundreds of people were opened in Indonesia. He spoke about the gradual spread of Subud in the world.

Simone Guerrand spoke about the impact Subud made on his life. An automobile accident in which he lost part of an eye, changed his view of life. The fact that he was saved made him realize that he had to

change. He was always interested in the esoteric so, when he and Subud crossed paths, he immediately knew it was for him. It helped him to grow and find himself. He said "something awakened in me that would make a difference to my desire .. and understand I was part of this human race, and human suffering".

Simon said that he had a total change from the usual background that he came from. His appreciation of art developed and he had an inner contentment that he did not have before. Simon's twin brother Hubert was so amazed that he said "you have changed so much, I think I will join". So Hubert came to Subud!

Simon also felt after the near death experience, it switched something in him and made him aware that he had a limited time and needed to do something in life that had meaning. So the Guerrand Hermes Foundation for Peace was established. It deals with interreligious dialogue and the 'belief that teachers' spirituality is essential to the flowering and unfolding of children'. Hence the interest in education of children

He felt that "the latihan is something that is not ready to wear, but custom made. The dimension of inner understanding brought me a confidence, and a certainty that God was most important".

Sharifin Gardiner talked about Susila Dharma International (SDI) and the projects they oversee. He talked about the inner help he gets through the latihan to rise above himself and help other humans. Humanitarian work is all about empowering people to run their own lives.

Children in poor countries deserve an education like other children do, all over the world. SDI works in partnership with OxFam.

SDI also plays an important role in community development. The International Children's Development Programme (ICDP) trains mothers and carers to deal with children in a compassionate and interactive way.

We all have freedom of choice. Humans live for a higher purpose and it makes life meaningful. We can never reach perfection, but as human beings we try to rise above who we already are.

Alexandra Asseily was the next speaker. She is a psychotherapist. She talked about forgiveness and healing. After the devastation of Lebanon and the destruction of her home, she set up a Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut. She believes that violence is in the genes, is inter-generational and very deeply ingrained. What we hold on to in our lives as memory is something they (our ancestors) held on to as well. If we let go, they are free! We have to release our pain and relieve our repetitious traumas.

What is our responsibility to bring about peace in the world?

We need to take responsibility for our own part in violence.

We need to understand the power of forgiveness by forgiving ourselves as we forgive others. Asking for forgiveness can be done anytime. (So start now)

This presentation of Subud at the Melbourne Parliament will be reported in full. A video will also be available at a later date.

The evening of December 9 saw the closing of the Parliament of the World's Religions. As we all came

together in the great hall, renowned speakers, religious and spiritual leaders from all over the world expressed their joy in participating in this amazing Parliament.

The world famous 94 year old Dadi Janki of the Bramha Kumaris said that when we experience truth, love and mercy and share it with the rest of humanity, there is hope and there is no need to worry.

Then came the Dalai Lama. He was the star attraction. Even before the doors to the plenary hall were thrown open, several queues snaked through the foyer in anticipation of hearing the great man talk.

Before the Dalai Lama was introduced, the chanting of the monks of Gyuto Tantric Monastery in Dharamsala, India, home of the Dalai Lama, reverberated through the huge hall and my chest! These monks are world famous for their deep and powerful harmonic chanting.

As the Dalai Lama appeared, the thousands who had thronged the hall, stood up in respect. The Dalai Lama said he was extremely happy to attend this event. He said that the crisis which humanity faces cannot be solved until we are able to respect all religions, and also respect the non believer. This resonated with the audience, who gave him a standing ovation.

As the closing ceremony wound down, there was a poignant cello invocation for world peace by Michael Fitzpatrick. Tributes from Robert Doyle the Lord Mayor City of Melbourne and other dignitaries flowed.

As we left the hall, we were all told to walk towards the bridge where photographs were taken from the Convention building. This photograph is to be presented as part of the Parliament's commitment to the Environment at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference.

What was an amazing experience came to an end. Our wonderful Subud brothers whom we met everyday and sisters with whom we latihan and attended some of the sessions together, were planning to leave soon. I will miss the lunches and the dinners that we shared all through the week. I felt we had a taste of a mini Subud congress in Melbourne.

There was yet the Guerrand Hermes Foundation Board meeting to be completed. Simon Guerrand, Tuti, Sharif, Alexandra Asseily, Garrett Thomson, Scherto Gill and Patrice Brodeur moved to the Novatel on the beach in St. Kilda.

Liliane Tavakiliane left for Queensland, and Osanna stayed on another day before leaving for Christchurch. Sharifin Gardiner is birdwatching on the coast and will be leaving for Christchurch soon.

In closing, the Wurrundjeri people mentioned how proud they are to be the original hosts of the Parliament of the World's Religion in Melbourne. Theirs was the oldest living culture of the world - over 60,000 years. They need their passion to be heard, so that everyone can heal. This is their journey right here, and they need to tell the story of how it is.

Until World Congress 2010 when we will all meet again.