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Common Ground for a Wiccan and a Rabbi?

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

By Gordon Mehler

The Parliament of the World's Religions, which kicked off Thursday in Toronto, brings together thousands of representatives from dozens of religious traditions. The largest and oldest event of its kind, it will focus on the gentler virtues of interreligious cooperation and "inclusion." It deserves to be better known, but one reason for its relative anonymity is the conspicuous absence of many traditionalist religious groups.

Today's parliament tracks back to a landmark interfaith convention held in conjunction with the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. It introduced Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists and Jains to more Americans than ever before. Historian William Hutchison notes in his 2003 book, "Religious Pluralism in America," that no prior American interreligious gathering "of any magnitude" had ever brought together anyone but Protestants. In 1993 an interfaith group resurrected the parliament, which now convenes every few years in a different city.

With hundreds of lectures and panels spread over a week, participants discuss a variety of religious topics. Some of the panels are a little out there, such as a drive to imprint the Golden Rule on Arizona license plates, but mostly the parliament resembles a colorful religious bazaar, with mandalas, shofars and whirling dervishes.

Yet there was a paucity of mainstream Mormons.

Why are interfaith opportunities like this more of a niche attraction for religious liberals? Theology provides a partial answer. The parliament's inclusiveness extends to indigenous African, Asian, European and Native American spirituality. This approach contradicts the Abrahamic faiths' traditional rejection of other religions as equals. Wide-net interreligious convocations seem to traditionalists to put their faiths on par with that of a shaman who prays to mountain spirits.

The Southern Baptists, America's largest Protestant denomination, previously declined to send an official representative to the parliament. An Eastern Orthodox delegation walked out when Wiccans and other neopagans were recognized by a past parliament. And traditionalists often see themselves as unwelcome at big-tent religious conferences. Many advocates of religious pluralism increasingly scorn traditional stances on sex roles and gay marriage, for example.

Multifaith extravaganzas also can miss what often is most important to believers: religion as a private and local pursuit, often of long-rooted family faith and tradition. Religion on a small scale is mainly about getting right with God, caring for loved ones, and finding better ways to cope with life's hardships. Practitioners of other religions may be respected as good people, but sustained curiosity about their

Many traditionalists shun the Parliament of the World's Religions. They're missing out.

natural disasters, for instance, it often produces meaningful interreligious encounters.

But the relative absence of religious traditionalists at the Parliament of the World's Religions is still unfortunate. While the developing world overall remains highly religious, the "nones" of the Western world—those unidentified with any historical religious group—have grown dramatically. By 2050 Islam will come close to surpassing Christianity as the world religion with the most adherents, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey. Though overt proselytizing at the parliament is frowned upon, traditionalists nonetheless have an important role in shaping this different and more diffuse religious future.

The realities of globalization have created greater religious diversity even within families—and increased the need to know about more than one religious approach. In Iowa, with its strong Lutheran and Methodist presence, many Catholic priests now hail from places like Ghana and Myanmar. Americans today have an ostensibly Presbyterian president, married to a Catholic. He has an observant Jewish daughter whose mother grew up in an atheistic communist milieu.

The competitive creed in world religions has often proved troublesome. It can make some

Seminaries set up brochure tables, while religious publishers display their wares. There are also introductory lectures on a kaleidoscope of faiths. Think Taoism 101.

Yet religious traditionalists largely have stayed away. Evangelical Protestants are in short supply, as are conservative Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews. When the parliament last met, in Salt Lake City in 2015, a high-ranking Mormon elder politely delivered welcoming remarks.

beliefs and rituals can be disorienting to many believers. To others it smacks of spiritual tourism.

Traditionalists might seem insular to the broad-minded denizens of the parliament, but one person's comfortable bubble is another's cohesive community. It may be fascinating to experience how Zoroastrians use fire at their prayer services, but religious inclusion seems to work best in a secular realm. When disparate religious groups work together after

more prone to rigid certainty and more willing to denigrate other religions. The Parliament of the World's Religions certainly skews left, but it still has something valuable to offer. Religious conservatives and traditionalists should share what they have to offer at this and future gatherings.

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