



Religious leaders finished their meeting at Montserrat yesterday. Meanwhile in Barcelona, the flame of peace was lit at the opening ceremony for the Parliament of the World's Religions / EFE

The parliament of hope

Participants hope that interfaith dialogue can help to foresee and even prevent the problems of the future

REBECCA WARDEN

Thousands of people braved yesterday's hot sun to attend the opening ceremony of the Parliament of the World's Religions at the Forum in Barcelona. The event, which follows a smaller gathering of 400 religious leaders in Montserrat, is proving to be one of the Forum's most high profile events, even though a big attraction, the Dalai Lama, could not attend for health reasons.

Participants hope that this kind of interfaith dialogue will help to create more respect between people of different religions and thereby contribute to world peace.

Various ceremonies took place during the day to symbolise the need for peace. This included the lighting of the flame for world peace. Since 1992, flames have been lit by peace activists at important events such as the G-8 summit in Okinawa, Japan.

Yesterday's speakers included expert on interreligious dialogue Ramon Panikar, Rabbi David Rosen, head of an organisation which promotes Christian-Jewish understanding and Iranian human rights activist and Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. Fèlix Martí, of the Unesco Centre of Catalonia, called on the Catalan administration to

"avoid religious biases" in its way of working. He was also concerned that the parliament should have a lasting impact and said that parliament officials "should have a mandate ... to follow up any of the initiatives related to interfaith dialogue from Barcelona."

In an interview with the press Islamist intellectual Tariq Ramadan, due to participate in several sessions, called on European Muslims to do something to combat the negative public image of Islam that has grown up since the 9/11 attacks. "It is important to get out of the social, intellectual and cultural ghetto," he

said, "We have to reach out to others in Europe and in the US so that they understand that we are normal citizens. We must not trivialise Islam, but we must normalise our presence and integrate in society."

The conferences over the next week will concentrate on four main themes; religious violence, refugees, clean water and international debt. Four types of activities are planned. Intrafaith programmes will bring together members of the same religion to discuss these four themes.

Interfaith discussion will allow participants to exchange information about their different faiths and

what resources there are within their traditions to deal with conflict. With engagement, people will recount success stories of how interreligious movements have tackled social problems. Finally, encounters will provide a less structured way for participants to meet and talk.

Ela Gandhi, grand daughter of the Mahatma Gandhi and a South African peace activist, stated that in her country "Interfaith dialogue is very important, with religious leaders meeting the president in order to share experiences. Only dialogue will enable us to foresee the problems of the future."

The Olesa Passion plans to put on a free performance for the Forum

MICHAEL BUNN

On 10 July, the Olesa Passion of Montserrat will be performing a free show of the mystery play as part of the Parliament of World Religions, together with the Forum. The show will be put on at the Teatre de la Passió, though it is usually performed at Olesa de Montserrat.

During the fourteenth century, the Passion was put on in public and as part of civic ceremonies, and was very popular with all the local people. However, after a long time in which the Passion was basically a form of street theatre, the church

decided that it should be performed within a more suitable setting, and so it began to be put on in the church itself. The Olesa Passion was first mentioned in church documents in 1540, which also include a list of the costumes worn by the different characters.

The 7 July performance will be an abridged version lasting for two hours and featuring the main scenes from the Olesa Passion. The theatre company decided to give a free performance so that more people will have the chance to see one of the finest mystery plays in all of Catalonia.



Mary Magdalene kneels at the feet of Jesus, shown in a tableau at the feast at Simon's house