

## **Parliament of the World's Religions 2018**

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This summer, I had the opportunity to participate in the Temple of Understanding's Summer Internship Program. Along with 17 other interns from around the United States and the world, all near the end of high school or the beginning of university, I lived in New York City for a month and explored the worlds of interfaith work, the United Nations, and all of our faith traditions.

The bulk of our time as interns was spent attending meetings at the United Nations, in particular the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Yet, as anyone who has spent time at the U.N. will tell you, "it's a very different world over there." Often, reality is distorted by the constraints of the institution, and it was for this reason that the days that stick in my memory are our visits to places of worship and our service projects that gave context to what we heard about cooperation, poverty, or education at the U.N.

Throughout our month, we were welcomed by the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, by a Sikh Gurudwara in New Jersey, and by the Won Buddhist Temple of Manhattan. At each, we were explained the basics of the practices and beliefs of the faith in question, then had extensive group conversation with the religious leaders there.

Through these conversations, the diversity of backgrounds present among the interns and how that affected each of our perspectives taught me as much as the leaders themselves. Among our group were a Sikh, a Hindu, Shia and Sunni Muslims, Catholic, Anglican, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Coptic Christians, and multiple other faiths. By my count, interns either were from or had parents from at least 14 different countries.

I myself grew up with a Jewish mom and a Quaker dad, and while we celebrated Christmas and Passover, I had only ever been to a synagogue once in my life and had never been to a Quaker meeting. Like many of the other interns, I was not particularly religious, and had never felt as if religion was missing from my life. Yet, over the course of the internship, I began to feel like there was more I could learn from my own faith background. As a result, I attended Shabbat services at the beautiful Central Synagogue and sat in contemplative silence at my first ever Quaker meeting, along with two Catholic interns, one from Guadalajara and one from London, who wanted to come along.

After that Quaker meeting, as my British friend was asking questions about Quakerism, and as I was doing my best to answer with what little I knew, he asked the following question.

"If you have to wait for spiritual consensus in the meeting, how does anything get done?"

I think much interfaith work faces the same problem, and I think the U.N. struggles with it as well. How do we move from talking, thinking, praying, or even educating about issues to really creating change?

Each and every intern wanted a way to help with a problem they cared about, whether that was women's rights, climate change, or violent conflict. Many of the interns, and many young people

in general, see less value in talking with religious leaders than in going out and solving problems. This makes it difficult to get young people involved in interfaith work, but it also means that when they are involved, the potential for change is enormous.

At the heart of what the Temple of Understanding does is this synthesis of interfaith dialogue with real issues, and I believe it is for this reason that their program is so effective. Not only did the Temple get so many people of my generation interested in interfaith work, but it gave us the experience and the opportunity to go out and create our own change.