

Melbourne hosts multi-faith festival



The Dalai Lama is one of thousands of religious figures gathering in Melbourne

Climate change, indigenous rights and the west's relationship with Islam will be the subjects of one of the world's largest inter-faith festivals.

The Parliament of the World's Religions begins today in Australia.

It is expected to attract up 8,000 people from a broad range of faiths, including the Dalai Lama.

Buddhist monks from Vietnam, rabbis from Israel and revered Hindu philosophers are converging on Melbourne for the festival.

It is convened every five years and has a simple, symbolic premise - to bring together different people to talk about their beliefs and share ideas.

Islam

Environmental sustainability, the eradication of poverty and self-determination for indigenous groups will be discussed over the next six days.

There will be a special focus too on Islam.

The director of the conference Dirk Ficca, a Presbyterian minister from the United States, says it is important that the voices of moderate Muslims are heard.

"There are going to be 40 programmes on Islam and the West. Talk about a tradition that is misunderstood, talk about a tradition that is maligned, talk about a tradition where one per cent of the tradition has given the entire community a bad name - it is Islam.

"And so we want to give reputable Islamic scholars and leaders the chance first of all to share what they believe Islam is all about," he said.

Up to 8,000 delegates from 80 countries are expected to attend the conference in Melbourne. Organisers have said that the closing address will be delivered by the Dalai Lama, who is on a visit to Australia and New Zealand.

Speaking in Sydney, the Nobel Peace Prize winner had a message for world leaders ahead of climate change talks next week in Copenhagen - he urged them to make the issue of global warming their "number one" priority.