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Religion parliament pulls fundamentalist, humanist protests

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Photos by John Herbert

The Parliament of the World's Religions opened Dec. 3 in Melbourne, Australia where some 8,000 people are gathered to discuss issues such as climate change, indigenous rights and the West's relationship with Islam. Edmund Chia, on the faculty of the Catholic Theological Union, is there and filing forNCR. This is his second report.

Melbourne
By Edmund Chia

We have been greeted each morning by a group of Christians bearing banners protesting the very idea of the Parliament of the World?s Religions. Their main issue is that the Parliament is ?intellectually dishonest at best,? claimed one of the protesters, as ?these people are addressing different notions of truth? while truth, the protester asserts, ?is a person, the person of Jesus Christ.? For the Bible clearly states that ?Jesus is the way, the truth and the life? (Jn 14:6).

It is thus ?sacrilegious for our Christian government to spend $4.5 million bringing people together to talk about truths in religions when we should not trust religions in the first place.?

This indictment, they were quick to add, includes the Christian religion, especially those which ?do not take seriously the message of Jesus who is God.?

Yet another group awaits us every evening as we exited the convention halls, also bearing placards but which read ?Let Reason Dictate,? ?You think your religion is true? Prove it!,? and ?Separation of Church and State.? Like the first group this second group, wearing T-shirts identifying themselves as ?Proudly Atheist,? also laments the fact that the Australian government is spending 4.5 million of tax dollars in support of what they

regard as a ?delusion.?

To this, a local participant of the Parliament lashed out: ?What?s wrong with that if the government can spend 3.5 million dollars bringing Tiger Woods into the country??

While both the morning and evening protesters seem to be waging war on those participating in the Parliament, it doesn?t take much to notice that they should instead be battling it out against each other. On the other hand, one might also note that the two groups have more in common with each other than they are aware of. For, are not both groups taking scriptural texts rather literally? (the first group to validate its claims and the second to denounce them).

Whereas, the majority of those attending the Parliament probably holds that texts such as John 14:6 are in the realm of faith, claims and so should be taken seriously but not literally. Thus, the first group ought not to use scripture as weapon to pass judgments upon others, while the second ought not to expect religionists to prove their faith.

Faith claims, like love claims, are in the realm of the transcendent or spiritual (not unlike claims of love, beauty, and justice) and cannot be empirically validated and should not breed exclusivism. This was exactly what the speakers at the Parliament were at pains to articulate.

In a session entitled ?How Spiritual Progressives can help move both Religious and Secular Communities to enlarge their focus beyond personal fulfillment or individual salvation toward a Global Transformation,? Rabbi Michael Lerner appealed to the Progressives in all religions to ?reclaim our religions? which have all too often been ?hijacked by the literalists and conservatives.?

Another speaker, Swami Agnivesh, a Brahmin priest from India, shared on how he was brought up to regard some people as pure and others ?untouchables.? ?I was even taught,? Agnivesh continued, ?that on a few days every month I should not touch my mother and sisters or I would have to perform rites of cleansing.?

Religions, he said, seem to be ?quite good at teaching people to divide society.? Another theme which came out strongly at the Parliament is best exemplified in a session on ?Sacred Envy,? where the speakers were frank about what they envied of the beauty found in the sacred practices of other religions and what they admired most and least about their own. Rabbi Brad Hirschfield began by saying that ?we are not all the same and that

that?s a good thing!?

"Our task,? he continued, is to ?figure out how to honor our differences with dignity.? The aim of interfaith dialogue is not for any party to end up feeling superior, just as we don?t want anyone exposed to others to return home telling the spouse ?Honey, I?m sticking with you not because you are beautiful, kind, and loving, but because everyone else out there is so damn ugly, unkind, and horrible.?

In another session, entitled ?Our Inter-religious Future,? Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, began with an observation that in today?s world we ?cannot be religious unless we are also interreligious.?

Sharing about his childhood in New York where many of his neighbors were Jews, ?there was no choice but for me to have many Jewish friends.? He then went on to say that by the time he was old enough to understand prejudices ?it was too late.?

?My friendships with our Jewish neighbors were already so strong that these prejudices didn?t matter!? Fr. John Pawlikowski, one of the foremost experts on Catholic-Jewish dialogue, identified the Second Vatican Council as the watershed for the ?fundamental change within Catholic Christianity? which opened the doors to more positive relations. It was especially in ?the document on Religious Liberty that the doctrine of ?error has no right to exist? was finally put to rest,? announced Pawlikowski.

If the two groups which greeted us outside the convention halls had engaged the event instead of protesting it they might have learned that the Parliament was not asking Christians to give up their faith in Christ nor to prove the truth of their religion or the falsity of others.

Instead, in line with its theme, the Parliament of the World?s Religions? invitation is for peoples of all religions to ?hear each other? so that together we can all ?make a world of difference? and contribute to ?healing the earth.?

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Parliament of World Religions opens in Australia [2]

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