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At the Parliament of the World's Religions

Joan Chittister | Dec. 11, 2009 From Where I Stand

Sr. Joan Chittister is keeping a travel journal as she attends the Asia Pacific Women, Faith and Development Summit to End Global Poverty in Melbourne, Austraila, Dec. 2-3; then the Parliament of the World's Religions, also in Melbourne through Dec. 9, and the U.N. conference on climate change in Copenhagen, Denmark. Here are her entries on the Parliament of the World's Religions.

Entry One

The Parliament of World's Religions opened in Melbourne, Australia, Dec. 3, a long delayed vision of religious leaders who had attended the first of these four gatherings in Chicago in 1893. The notion, then, of religious leaders meeting together, talking together, praying together and discussing the role of both themselves and their religions in the major issues of the world, was at best fanciful. More to the point, perhaps, impossible, unfaithful, undesirable and dangerous.

But here they are, 116 years and four parliaments -- Chicago II, Capetown, Brazil, and now Melbourne -- later, and more than 6,000 attendees strong. Despite the distance, despite the recession, despite the political tensions between their countries. They know one another now. You can hear the names being called as people pass one another on the escalators and as sessions begin.

More impressive, the program booklet is 360 pages long and 650 sessions deep. These people have a lot to talk about and even more to learn from one another. They meet on the same panels, sit side by side at the same meetings, listen to the hard questions that come from the other side of the room and leave stronger in their own faith, more respectful of one another?s views.

Maybe even more shocking, they deal with real questions. Not pious platitudes. Not political drivel. I?ll tell you more about all of that tomorrow.

Entry Two

As the brand new Melbourne Convention Center opened its doors to the world and to the plenary ceremony of the Parliament of the World's Religions, it was swamped in blessings given by all the major religions of the world: the ancient religion of aboriginal peoples, the contemporary blessings of Sikhs and Hindus, of Jewish rabbis and Buddhists monks, of patriarchs and bishops. The lobby of the center fairly teemed with the excitement of it.

Everywhere a veritable art gallery of religion strolled by: sheikhs in silk, Buddhist monks in maroon cotton, Sikhs in a tall turbans, bishops in scarlet and gold chains, platoons of various nuns from all places, all traditions, Jewish rabbis in yamulka, imams and priests in mufti and lay leaders of all stripes loaded down with booklets to give away, petitions to sign and programs to advertise. Clearly, God speaks in many tongues and in many places to a world full of different people. Photographers, reporters, and videographers were scrambling to find out what the world should think of such a thing.

At least as interesting as the costumery in the lobby -- as well as its absence in many of the most influential spiritual people of the time -- are the subjects such religious types had come to discuss with their counterparts a world away.

This was clearly not a gathering designed to create new spiritual practices or to discover new religious documents or to teach parochial truths. These people were here intent on discovering the world they lived in and their responsibility to it.

The themes of the conference gave clear proof of the role of religion as a vital force in contemporary society. The topics included, the program said clearly, pieces ?in the puzzle we must put together if we want to see our visions of peace and justice for people everywhere, of all religious and spiritual traditions, become reality.? They represent, the program went on, ?important ways of integrating personal and communal journeys into an ongoing commitment to make a difference in the world.?

The seven major subthemes of the parliament were: ?Healing the Earth with Care and Concern," "Indigenous Peoples," "Overcoming Poverty in an Unequal World," "Securing Food and Water for all People," "Building Peace in the Pursuit of Justice," "Creating Social Cohesion in Village and City.? and finally ?Sharing Wisdom in the Search for Inner Peace.? Nothing threatening to Catholicism. Nothing destructive of the faith. Nothing damaging to Christian fidelity. Too bad more Catholic clerics weren?t there to build the religious bridges this world needs before religion becomes the thing that destroys us.

If there was anything that spoke to me of religious pain, it was the number of people -- especially women -- who said to me, ?I was a Catholic once ...? Is there no one out there who cares enough to listen?

Tomorrow, an inside look at a few of the panels and discussions.

Entry Three

I found myself a participant on five of the parliament?s panels.

In the plenary session, titled ?We can stop poverty,? with Americans Rabbi David Sapterstein and Evangelical Jim Wallace as well as a Hindu monk, a Buddhist monk and a Japanese Zen master, our discussion raised the interesting and important question of whether poverty can be stopped or not.

The first problem, of course, is to distinguish natural poverty from unnatural poverty. The fact that a tsumani might wipe out coastal villages creates a kind of natural poverty that we can only alleviate, not avoid. The fact that women are paid less than men for doing the very same work is unnatural poverty. Of course we can stop that, as we can the exploitation of child labor and the national greed that underlies it all. But to do all of that, we all need to start teaching another version of ?Thou shalt not steal ...? which is clearly a religious question.

It?s impossible to talk about eliminating poverty without talking about the elimination of sexism and the elimination of militarism. Why we seldom hear homilies about those things in Christian churches may be the Christian question of the age.

Entry Four

Panels on ?Breaking through Patriarchy? and ?The Place of the Divine Feminine? highlighted in a way that I am not accustomed to in my own Western Christian?Catholic tradition the need for religion itself to face the implications of the sin of sexism.

The exclusion of women from religious consciousness, the enthronement of the male as an excuse for the exclusion of women?s spiritual insights and the effects of that marginalization on religion itself -- as well as on the society around us -- filled large conference rooms in the center and sounded the knell of the old, masculine frontiers of religions everywhere. Religion, too, is growing, evolving, developing. And as religion grows, so will a world as dead now as feudalism was in the 16th century.

Finally, ?Sacred Envy? dealt with both the bonds between us as with the gulfs of differences remaining. A woman rabbi led us to share what it was that we all most loved about our own traditions. Then, she asked us to identify what it was that we most admired in all the other traditions. Then, she asked us what it was we found most difficult about our own traditions. Finally, she asked us to share what it was that we found most difficult to accept in the traditions of others. The answers poured out: the exclusion of women, the politicization of religion, the iconization of a God who is all spirit, the exclusionist tendency of truth claims.

The Parliament of the World's Religions, neither official or determining in the religious world, is nevertheless dealing with the questions, groping for the answers, that will enable the world to stay glued together when politicians and corporate profiteers do all they can to pry it apart.

It was not an easy week. But it was the kind of week that makes all those other weeks, months, years in religion real.

Entry Five

Now, I am on a plane on my way to the U.N. Summit on Global Warming in Copenhagen. I?ll be back soon to tell you what happened there and what I think it may mean for the rest of us as we try to make our lives square with what we say we believe about God, about what it means to be a Christian, about our responsibilities as human beings.

Editor's Note: Read also Sr. Chittister's earlier entries on the **Asia Pacific Women, Faith and Development Summit to End Global Poverty** [1]. Read more NCR reports from the Parliament of World Religions **here** [2] and **here** [3].

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