NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Parliament discusses Alternatives to Empire

Edmund Chia | Dec. 11, 2009

Monk designs mandala at parliament gathering

Melboure, Australia
That the United States is the only superpower in the current world order needs no discussion. But that its superpower status is coming to an end is fueling both fear, of what lies ahead, as well as hope, that ?another world is possible.? This cliché was the subtopic of a session at the Parliament of the World?s Religions which met in Melbourne from 3-9 Dec, 2009.

Entitled ?Alternatives to Empire,? the session began with Professor Chandra Muzaffar, president of the International Movement for a Just World [1], enumerating signs of the impending fall of the American empire.

?More obvious than four years ago, when the Alternatives to Empire project [2]was launched,? Muzaffar recounts, ?the decline of the empire today is clearly manifest in three major areas:?

- The financial and economic crisis which began in the United States, involving the dollar and fundamental structures of the economy and means of production, have impacted practically all the rest of the world;
- The foundational pillar of the U.S. empire, i.e., military power, with bases girding the globe and a budget which exceeds one-half the total military expenditure of the entire world, has proved ineffective in achieving the empire?s aims. Hard-power, whether in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, or Afghanistan, has not been able to withstand the challenge of the people?s movement;
- If the empire has not been able to contain its own backyard (read: Latin America), how can it continue to wield an influence on the rest of the world? Considering that the implosion of the Soviet Union began with the revolutions in the surrounding Eastern European nations, the rejection today of United States? influence by a number of Latin American countries is certainly cause for concern for the empire.

What are the alternatives? Rev. Harry Kerr, the Convenor of Pax Christi Victoria, suggested that just as in Christianity ?when the first disciples were proclaiming Jesus is Lord they were actually challenging the Lordship of the Roman Empire,? so too people of faith today can rise up to offer alternative ways of organizing

and of living, especially ?in ways which are as radical as Jesus? fundamental option for the poor.? This was the early Church?s role until, Kerr laments, ?Christianity was co-opted by the empire and bishops began donning imperial vestments.?

Professor Larry Marshall, Officer of the Alternatives to Empire project, then asked, ?How do we challenge and respond when indeed our religions have been co-opted by the empire today?? It is the task ?of good people of faith to bring their faith in values such as peace, justice, and love to bear on the decisions of the empire and to challenge structures of power and dominance.?

Professor Joseph Camilleri, founder and director of the Center for Dialogue at La Trobe University, suggested that ?we question the way we currently organize human affairs which is by and large based on imperial structures.?

It is important ?to raise questions about the necessity for a dominant and domineering work and power ethic? of not only the empire and the State but of also the market place. And this is where the religious and ethical traditions can contribute, to help move us forward, and ?inject values of human dignity, sociality, justice, and the principle of respect for humanity,? Camilleri proffered.

All the panelists were of the view that we are in a global transition phase. The signs are all over that this is the era for change. ?The epoch of western dominance is coming to an end,? Muzaffar announced. The trends in the last few years, ?as manifest in the global economic crisis, the environmental crisis, the food and energy crises, and the water crisis which is yet to come, cry out for the need of an alternative.? Either people of faith offer that alternative or others, especially those with less than noble visions and values, will offer them for us.

But for sure, it will be a changed world order, moving away from a unipolar global system to a multipolar global system. No single nation-state has been able to accumulate the massive power which the United States currently enjoys: economic, political, technological, and military power. While China may have the economic might and Russia the military might, they lack the other dimensions of power which the United States was able to muster in the post World War II world.

The signs of hope are that there is a rise of religious consciousness on a global scale, where people of faith have taken on a deep interest in and are actively involved in the public arena. This resurgence is multipolar as well. For example, in the United States, while there is the Evangelical resurgence which tend to be fundamentalist and narrow in its concerns, ?there is also the resurgence,? Muzaffar said, ?of Christians inspired by the likes of Jesuit Fr. John Dear who are standing up to the empire.?

Likewise, in the Muslim world while we have fundamentalists such as Osama bin Laden standing up to the empire we also have countless number of movements and individuals who are doing the same but abhorring violence. As presently constituted some of these religious resurgences remain inadequate but ?must ask the searching questions and provide an alternative to empire as well as to religion,? Muzaffar acknowledged. They must move away from insular and exclusivistic approaches and an obsession with issues of identity politics.

Meanwhile, the small efforts of individuals and groups to provide wholistic alternatives need to be sustained so that, truly, ?another world is possible.? We have actually not much of a choice, Muzaffar concludes, ?for in the current world ethos it is either we flourish together or we will perish together.?

Edmund Chia is on the faculty of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/26/2015 - 11:50*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/parliament-discusses-alternatives-empire

Links:
[1] http://www.just-international.org/
[2] http://www.alternativestoempire.org