

Parliament of the World's Religions

July 7-13, 2004
Barcelona, Spain

A Major Report by the ACCC

by Dr. Ralph G. Colas, Executive Secretary

With long flowing hair and dressed in a purple robe, the self-proclaimed witch, Rev. Selena Fox, spoke to the large group in attendance at the "Circles in the Greenwood" workshop. She said, "You must always focus on the here and now and not any future or eternal life. If you be pagan or not, you must understand that Paganism is a world religion. All religions either came from paganism or opposition to it."

Shaking some rattles as she moved about the room she urged everyone to "honor the divine first in a religious way and then the pagan way." Now the attendees began to hum with "Um's" and "Ah's" as they followed Fox's instructions.

Then Michael York, a professor at Bath Spa University College, and "Morgana," another Wiccan High Priestess, underlined the importance of humanism, pleasure and honoring the earth. It was suggested that everyone in the room begin to call themselves a priest or priestess. It was revealed that at least 5-6% of the world's population practice pagan rituals with that number increasing every year. Representatives of the Pagan Religion in attendance at this Parliament in Barcelona came from 11 countries and 4 continents.

It was also announced that many of them are registered as "pagan clergy" in the state of Massachusetts and are not only able to perform pagan weddings, but also weddings for same-sex couples in that state.

This session led by the Pagans was but one of hundreds held during July 7-13, 2004, in Spain. More than 1,000 speakers led some 430 panels/workshops along with the large Plenary Sessions where everyone gathered in a huge Forum. More than 8,200 participants registered for the entire week but it was announced that at least 143,000 attended some part of the Parliament activities. There were religious leaders, social activists, and educational and governmental individuals who gathered together under the banner, "Pathways to Peace: the Wisdom of Listening, the Power of Commitment."

Rev. Rick Ficca, the event's executive director, a position he has held since 1992, said, "This would not be an assembly issuing a declaration on what the world should do. Instead the goal of the conference was to help all participants create and share commitments through a list of simple and profound acts they would bring back to their home communities."

Ficca, a Presbyterian minister, was the individual who created a stir in his own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), a few years ago by preaching a sermon on "What's the big deal about Jesus?" That same denomination at its next annual meeting debated and discussed for hours whether John 14:6 excluded followers of other religions entering heaven. Their conclusion was that for them it would be necessary to come by Jesus Christ, but that did not mean that those who came another way would be denied entrance into God's heaven.

The Parliament's first press conference underlined the program for each day. It was organized in three primary sections: 1. INTRARELIGIOUS—An opportunity to learn about the teaching of other religious groups. 2. INTERRELIGIOUS—Focusing on dialogue and panel discussions. 3. ENGAGEMENT—Sessions to build projects and initiatives together.

The four themes emphasized were: Refugees, Water, Debt Cancellation and Religious Violence. A partial list of the religious groups involved were: Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, Roman Catholic, Bahai, Zoroastrian, Presbyterian Church (USA), Mennonite, American Baptist, Unity, Lutheran, Yorban along with numerous Pagans.

No open criticism of Muslim involvement in terrorism was heard. The President of the World Council of Muslims, Irfan Khan said, "You have to look for the solutions to our problems by having inner values." Another panel dealt with the issues Muslim women face by not being permitted to wear Islamic dress at the workplace.

While little or no criticism of terrorism in Iraq or Palestine was heard, there was frequent criticism of the U.S.A. Dr. Hans Kung, a Swiss theologian, said, "It is very clear that oil is more important than Islam for the Americans. It gives the USA a power base for its Middle East policy and helps maintain its position as the world's only super power."

While this reporter did not see anyone associated with the Parliament wearing this message on their shirts, in other venues several young men sported T-shirts with two words on them in big, bold type—"KILL BUSH." One may wonder if these young men would wear those shirts near or on a U.S. military base where our brave troops seek to bring peace and freedom to a turbulent world. It is very evident that anti-American sentiment is prevalent in countries like Spain.

To prepare the area for the Parliament meant clearing and renovating so the beautiful Forum could be built. It was a very large auditorium with numerous smaller buildings in the vicinity. It was learned that the cost for this project was \$600 million and 60% was public and 40% private funds. An attempt to find out how many millions were received by the leaders of the event was denied. Observation clearly revealed no apparent lack of funds for this meeting. Everything associated with it was first class with facilities, equipment and security.

The Mayor of Barcelona and Marie Clarke Brill of the Jubilee USA Network spoke to the press about one of the major themes—International Debt. (This same emphasis is heard at meetings of the World Council of Churches.) There is a forthright demand that wealthy nations, especially the USA, forgive all debt owed to them. The countries that need the greatest help, according to these leaders in Barcelona, are located in Africa and South America.

Brill spoke harshly of the International Bank Forum (IBF). She advised the press that when the IBF meets in Washington, D.C., in October 2004 there will be many protestors taking to the streets with a "warm reception." When asked how she could defend the many acts of violence that come with such protests, along with the destruction of private property even owned by minorities, this radical young lady responded that any acts of violence are minimal and it was the police who were the real problem. One can but recall the fires, breaking into stores, assaulting the police in Seattle, WA, when the IBF leaders met there. Therefore, her words are hollow and pathetic.

The Mayor at that particular press conference indicated, "The greatest threat in the world today is not terrorism as the USA announces, but AIDS."

Keynote speakers included Hans Kung, Swiss Theologian; Jane Goodall, Zoologist; Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi; Ela Gandhi, a South African peace advocate and granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi; and health expert and author Deepak Chopra. Much disappointment was expressed that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was not able to fulfill his scheduled place on the program. Those attending were informed that he was ill; however, it was also acknowledged the Chinese government may have hindered his attendance.

Great excitement was seen when the South Indian holy woman, known as Amma made her appearance. She is considered a living saint in her homeland. Amma is known worldwide for her practice of warmly embracing each of her followers. Thus far she has given 24 million hugs and enormous crowds gathered around her in Barcelona to be hugged by “The Hugging Saint.” She told the thousands who came to her lecture that “there is no harm in having many religions, but it is harmful to think they are different and that one faith is higher than another.” Amma herself is a Hindu.

Dr. Jane Goodall, world famous zoologist who works with primates, related that chimpanzees have a soul. “If I have a soul,” she said, “So do the animals and both of us have a spark of the divine.” When asked if animals go to heaven she evaded giving an answer, by saying she was not a theologian. But she also declared, “The major religions represented here have best understood my message to respect nature. We need to do more than thank God for our food, we need to thank the animals.”

Great attempts were made during the entire meeting to “build bridges.” The buzz word was “Peace” as a “Peace Pole” was dedicated and then a “Peace Flame” was delivered to center stage. Everyone was then invited to observe the planting of a “Peace Tree” by Chief Jake Swamp of the Mohawk Nation.

A few of the statements made at this Parliament were: “All religions are true and all are equally true”; “All religions preach peace”; “I am a Muslim plus all other religions”; “Expose our children to all religions so they can choose the best out of all religions”; “Barcelona has become a holy city”; “All the world’s problems originate in the mind”; “Paganism teaches respect and love for the other”; “The day that hunger is eradicated from the earth, there will be the greatest spiritual explosion the world has ever known.”

Hundreds and hundreds of Sikh were in attendance as they were celebrating four historic anniversaries. They included a Sikh baptism, continuous reading of the Sikh scriptures, exhibits and artistic panel dedication, along with the preparation and serving of “blessed vegetarian food.” As many as 9,000 were fed complete meals for five days without any cost to those who came beneath the huge tents erected by the Sikh personnel. Everyone was seated on the floor and white scarfs were given so all heads could be covered while eating. Boxes of literature were distributed to those who came for the free meals served by the courteous Sikh wearing turbans on their heads. All of this was an attempt to prove that all religions are true and equally true.

No less than 75 leaders of the liberal National Council of Churches (NCC) were in attendance. A workshop was led by Rev. Santa Premawardhana, Interfaith Relations Director of the NCC, in which he declared, “My dream is that Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and all other religions work together to prevent religion-related violence.” He was careful not to be critical of Muslim terrorist attacks in the USA or in Israel. That was conveniently overlooked not only by this liberal clergyman but as well by the other speakers at this large event.

The music at the Parliament was for the most part minor in tone. More than 10,000 gathered at the Sagrada Famila Temple for a “Sacred Music Concert.” They featured Native American, Shumei Ensemble, Sikh, Catholic, Shinto, Muslim and Jewish artists. The only recognizable “Christian” song was “O Happy Day” with hard rock music in the background. The archbishop of the Catholic Church made preliminary remarks before the two hour “concert.” At other plenary sessions there were chants, bells rung and clapping of hands.

At one plenary session the keynote speaker, Shirin Ebadi, 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, used the occasion to be critical of the USA. She said, “President Bush attacked another country using the guise of human rights.” An Indian religious leader expressed his view of universality, which according to him (Deepak Chopra), comes from sensorial experiences. He said, “The atoms that pertain to me, pertain to others, so we are part of George Bush and Bin Laden.” More than one speaker issued the warning that the USA is “taking over the world.”

A letter to President Bush was prepared and everyone was urged to take a copy, sign it and then the Parliament would send the letters to Washington, D.C. Included in the letter were these lines, "We sincerely hope that the leaders of the United States would lead the people of the United States to realize that the best interests of any people can best be maintained and protected by living as partners with all peoples of the world in mutual respect and in just relationships. Because of the military and economic power that the U.S. wields, the decisions made in Washington, D.C., often affect the lives of millions of people in the world negatively. The only option is to work for the best interests of the total human community and not only for the interests of the U.S."

No expression of sorrow ever was forthcoming about 9/11 and the thousands of innocent lives taken by radical Muslims who hijacked commercial planes and flew them into buildings. Instead Uncle Sam is a "dirty bully" who practices "power politics."

The press officer along with Dr. Leshner, chairman of the board of trustees for the Parliament's council, pushed aside a pointed question directed to them by a Spanish reporter about Scientology. He asked those two leaders, "Has not Scientology been considered at previous parliaments to be a radical cult and not to be welcomed? Yet there is a session promoting that cult here in Barcelona?" The short reply was "we simply cannot control everything taking place here." Indeed there was a workshop led by the Director of the Church of Scientology International, Fabio Amicarelli. He rehearsed the basic tenets of their group and with visuals related the practical methods used by Scientologists around the world. The fact that this heretical group bought exhibit space and were also able to promote their nearly two hour session with flyers passed out everywhere demonstrates their influence and acceptance in spite of some so-called previous declaration that they were not to be welcomed at future parliaments.

Another "nonprofit religious organization" present in Barcelona was the Covenant of the Goddess, a group of Wiccans located in Berkeley, CA, which identified themselves as "one of the largest and oldest Wiccan religious organizations, with members in North America, Europe and Australia. Witchcraft is a life-affirming, earth-and-nature-oriented religion which sees all of life as sacred and interconnected. Rituals, therefore, coincide with the phases of the moon and especially those days which fall in between May Day and Halloween. Our ethical code is 'As it harm none, do ye what ye will,' which honors the freedom of each individual to do what she or he believes is right."

This Covenant of the Goddess also declared its power to "confer credentials on our qualified clergy. (Two-thirds of our clergy are women.) We also provide for the needs of our members with disaster relief, health insurance, Scouting awards, sponsorship of college and university student groups, and legal assistance in instances of discrimination."

A large plenary session that dealt with "Mahatma Gandhi and Religious Pluralism" involved six speakers, which included Gandhi's granddaughter Ela Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi was quoted as saying, "after long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that all religions are true; all religions have some error in them; all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one's own relatives."

Those who spoke related that Gandhi "did like the Sermon on the Mount and understood Jesus was the son of the people and a great teacher, so Gandhi said he had Christ plus other religions." Another speaker underlined that Gandhi was opposed to anyone attempting to convert an individual out of their religious beliefs. The explanation given as to the process where one becomes, as Gandhi did, a "Mahatma" is when they "understand that spirit is supreme and such constraints create new opportunities to disobey the lower laws and to obey the higher laws. Thus Gandhi became a non-violent pacifist."

Observations by this reporter:

1. While the theme of the parliament was "Pathways to Peace" with a "peace pole, peace flame and peace tree" along with much talk about "peace," the entire event is a reminder that "The way of peace they know not" (Isaiah 59:8) and "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). The Prince of Peace, our Lord Jesus Christ, was ignored and nothing was ever said that "...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).
2. When advice is given at a session led by Witches that the best "ethical code" is "As it harm none, do ye what ye will," it leaves decision making up to the individual. The Bible tells us of the time when the children of Israel did the same. It is recorded in Judges 21:25 "...every man did that which was right in his own eyes." When God's commands are pushed aside, disaster always follows.
3. The emphasis upon pluralism (all religions are the same) was echoed over and over again at the parliament. The exclusiveness of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone was completely ignored- in fact, it was ridiculed. Yet John 14:6 teaches that Jesus Christ is the ONLY way of salvation. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me." Without the Way-there is no going; without the Truth-there is no knowing; without the Life-there is no living.
4. This was the Fourth Parliament of the World's Religions. The first was in 1893 in Chicago and the second in the same city 100 years later. Chuck Colson, evangelical leader was on the program at that 1993 event. Colson had been awarded a million dollar prize given by the John Templeton organization. After Colson spoke there in Chicago, a Buddhist prayed, "By the power of an excellent self-enlightened mind, perfect mind..." In 1999 the parliament met in South Africa and at the first press conference in Barcelona in 2004 the point was made that this was the first time a parliament was held outside an English speaking country. More than 60% of the thousands who attended were not from Spain. Members of the press covering this event numbered more than 150, with seemingly only one biblical Fundamentalist there for the purpose of reporting on the meeting.
5. At such a parliament, credibility is given to all kinds of so-called religious groups. The practice of Syncretism (merging together different religions into one) was very evident in Barcelona. Anyone who disagreed with this practice was identified as a hindrance to world peace and lacking appreciation for the "cafeteria-style religion" freely offered there in Barcelona. The fact that some groups profess no belief in God or a supreme being seemed to make little or no difference to the spiritually blind attending and promoting this parliament.
6. One feature was the performance of the play, "To you-the Birdie." A proper description of the entire event in Barcelona can be found in Revelation 18:2. In describing the apostate religions of the world gathering together, the Lord says such are "a cage of every unclean bird." This was a hodgepodge of religions and the command of our God is "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). Any believer whose membership is in a church or denomination that identified with this unbelief in Barcelona should immediately leave that "cage of dirty birds" and become part of a biblical Fundamentalist group rightly dividing the Word of Truth. Anything less is disobedience which never brings the blessing of God.
7. Do not ever forget that our blessed Lord Jesus Christ warned against wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). God's people need to test every organization and religious leader to see if some aspect of syncretism, liberalism and compromise is believed and practiced.

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils...Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away" (I Timothy 4:1; II Timothy 3:5).

