

Vision Beckons

From Parliament of Religions to Global Concourse of Religions

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For me this is a great privilege indeed to inaugurate the centenary celebrations of the World's Parliament of Religions. The World's Parliament of Religions, convened in this historic city of Chicago a century ago, held aloft a torch which helped us see a vision. We are far today from having realized it, but to renew that vision is the purpose of my few words this evening.

I. Our Goal: The Spiritual Unity of the Human Race

It is a perennial yearning of the human race to find its own unity. To this, I believe, the 1893 Parliament responded. Of course, the Columbian Exposition was there with all the glory of the technology which had just come into being in the last two decades of the last century. But along with all that urban-industrial, scientific-technological progress, in the mind of humanity there was another yearning — the yearning for that which binds humanity together, the unity of

humanity on a spiritual basis, and not just on the basis of a mere technological-industrial civilization. That is the vision before us today. Technology and modern civilization are not that which will unite us ultimately. That civilization has made it possible for us to come together, and to communicate with each other, but that civilization cannot, alas, provide the necessary foundation for the spiritual unity of mankind. It is in search of that foundation that we, a hundred years later, begin these celebrations.

Secular People should be Included

In 1893, perhaps the purpose was to fight irreligion. Today, that cannot be our purpose. We do not want to fight. Religions have done their share of fighting in the past. We shall not fight wars, but wage peace. Because a thousand million secular people without belief are also human beings, we are not going to fight them. Religions should never gang up against something called irreligion. No, that shall not be our purpose. Our purpose shall be to provide a multi-faceted foundation on which, in mutual respect, the cultures of the world can come together and live in a global concourse of religions. And we shall not take the Golden Rule as our uniting principle as they did a hundred years ago. That was in fashion at the end of the last century when American liberal Christianity had lost its spiritual moorings and could only find this little plank of the Golden Rule to hold on to. That is not what is before us. What is before us is a rich, deep, penetrating, respectful understanding of each other's religions. Not a common religion which puts everything into one pot; we do not want a religion which unites all religions. What we want is a Global Concourse of all Religions, to which the unbeliever shall not be a stranger, but shall be wholly welcome. That is the vision we need to recreate.

You know, in the Soviet Union, which was supposed to be the most anti-religious expression of secular forces, today the accent is totally different. Marxists have recognized that the values which shall unite humanity and shall make it possible for nations to live together in peace cannot come out of a secular ideology, but will have to come from a moral vision of humanity as a global phenomenon. And, as a result of that, they are now openly apologizing for their attitude towards religion in the past. Last August [1989] the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches met in Moscow. Two hundred people were invited to the Kremlin for a reception. At that reception, the Prime Minister of the Soviet Union, Mr. Ryzhkov, made a 20-minute address in which he openly stated that the Party and government in the Soviet Union were wrong in their attitude towards religious people in the past, and asked us, literally, to forgive them. That is the world in which we live, where even secular people are turning towards religion to find meaning and hope. The unfortunate part of it is that religions are not quite ready to face that challenge, because the kind of exclusivistic, traditional religion on which most of us have been nurtured is not able to cope with the crying need of humanity for meaning.

All Religions should Flow Together

And that is the fundamental purpose of a permanent Parliament of Religions which will come out of these celebrations which we inaugurate this evening. I call it a "Global Concourse of Religions." You may later on agree to call it a Parliament; I would not quarrel. Parliament literally means "a talking shop." That is all right. But what I would like to see is a "concourse," a flowing together, a running together of all religions: active, dynamic, without losing their

identity, but in relation to each other, understanding each other, with mutual respect, and moving toward certain specific goals.

Parliament should be Free from Domination

Let me say something now which I hope can be understood. So long as Western civilization, or Western Christianity, dominate the World Parliament, or Concourse, it will not work, because the identities of the other religions bear strong hostility toward both Western Christianity and Western civilization for their aggression against the cultures of the world. Western civilization has been a largely one-way mission, in which both the civilization and the church claimed to know the truth and refused to listen to the aspects of truth in the experience of the rest of humanity. And, therefore, I want to say this from the heart: I love my Western brothers and sisters; I love my Western "Christian" brothers and sisters also. But where they dominate, an impasse prevails which does not allow the other cultures of the world to function. They are helplessly dominant. Men or women, they cannot do anything but dominate. And, therefore, the most important thing for a Global Concourse of Religions is for the Western civilization and Western Christianity to be humble and courteous enough to take a back seat. The West has contributions to make, of course. Especially, their capacity to organize is unparalleled — even by the Japanese! And so we will need your help in the organization of such a Global Concourse of Religions. But can you do it without dominating? Quietly? And let others be free to do it their way? Try! Then we might be able to use your God-given capacity in our common work, not as a leader, but in a more modest way. Otherwise, we would find the rest of the cultures of the world still inhibited by fear that they would be steam-rolled by Western civilization, Western Christianity, and their values and approaches. This is a very fundamental thing that I wanted to say on this occasion.

II. Commitment to the welfare of all humanity

A second fundamental thing that I wanted to say is that this Global Concourse of Religions must be committed not just to dialogue with each other, but to the future of humanity as a whole. If religions cannot get into that question of the welfare of all humanity, those great values to which they bear witness will not make much sense to vast millions of the people of this world. On the one hand, all religions have to develop a deep spiritual commitment, the re-creation of the deepest levels of meaning for human existence in a personal and communal spirituality. But equally important is the other pole: the commitment to the welfare of humanity, the commitment to justice, the commitment to peace, the commitment to an environment that promotes life rather than threatens to extinguish it, the commitment to eliminate toxic drugs and nuclear weapons. Three foci for such a Global Concourse are: justice, peace, and the environment. Those must be the three overarching goals of any global concourse that we shall set up. If it is not so, then most of the people of the world will say, "Well, another organization of religious people to talk among themselves about things which are interesting to them, but not of immediate concern to us."

1. Justice

I would say that the cry for justice is the most heart-rending cry of humanity, and if religion is not relevant to justice in the world, religion is not worth having. If religion is an escape from the

struggle for justice, then it's not worth much for most of the people in this world. Many would rather do away with religion altogether. And to touch on the issue of justice is also to touch on the fact that, among perpetrators of injustice, the religious people have more often been on the side of the oppressor than standing with the oppressed. This is what has made religion repulsive to many people. The reason why the secular humanist movement had to arise in the West was because the Christian religion lost its humanist vision. Because religion supported the cause of the oppressor, the slave owner, the exploiter, therefore a rival secular morality had to arise in this civilization. That is why we don't need to fight secularism, but rather should learn from it. We need to learn those great human values to which all people of good will stand committed, values which come out of our various religious heritages, but which the religions are not practicing today. If that doesn't happen, if this is going to be simply a talking-shop for old-style religion, then the Global Concourse may not make much sense to most people.

2. Peace

We all can talk about peace. Christians will say, "Christ is the Prince of Peace." Hindus can say, "Shanti, shanti, shanti." Jews can say, "Shalom." Muslims can say, "Salaam." All mean peace. Wonderful. But until recently, most of the wars in the world came out of religious conflicts. The last two world wars were, perhaps, not like that, but in the history of humanity religion has too often been the cause of war while talking about peace. And, therefore, we will have to shift our emphasis from talking to action for peace. In each religion there are two levels. One level is exclusivistic and expansionist. That is to say, each religion says, we have the truth and if you want to have the truth, join us. That is the exclusivist, expansionist, lower type of religion. All religions have that lower type. But in religions there is also a higher type, a type which is universal in its orientation, which is all-embracing in its love, which is non-discriminating between members of its own community and those outside. That good, humanistic, open tendency in all religions will have to be brought to the top. It is there. It only needs to be emphasized further. Only that way will we promote Peace on Earth.

3. Environment

Humanity exists between two poles-- its transcendent origin and ground on the one hand, and, on the other, the world with which it is integrally related. The latter point is easier to grasp, though often forgotten. If the Sun did not shine, my life on earth could not exist. And that Sun is a point in a multi-billion-star galaxy of galaxies in which all things are interconnected. The earth, with its oceans and lakes, rivers and wind-systems, mountains and clouds, birds and trees, animals and other humans is an integral part of my life. My life could not exist if that universe did not sustain and support it. And only one dimension of that vast and complex universe is open to our senses. I become a human being only by interacting with the earth-- consciously through work and unconsciously through my breathing and blood circulation, through my food-and-drink intake and elimination systems, and through the thousands of other unconscious processes going on in my body and mind, as well as around me.

Now something has happened to the way we interact with our earth. We came upon a developed science-technology and the big-machine industrial system only about a century ago. In fact, the World's Parliament of Religions was convened in connection with the Columbian Exposition of

America's industrial-technological achievements. Electricity came only in 1878, the telephone in 1876, the typewriter in 1873, and the railways and telegraph in 1866. There was an air of excitement about the new technology which revolutionized our interaction with the earth and our environment. Justified excitement, indeed, but what a mess our industrial system has got us into! Our problem today is that the earth is reacting rather negatively to our high-handed industrial-technological handling of it.

In fact, all the three problems we confront today — injustice, war, and environmental deterioration — are directly related to our technologically based industrial system. We have been too unrestrained and immature in our greedy handling of the earth and in our relationship with human beings on it. The Western version of the Christian religion bears a large share of the responsibility of bringing humanity to such a predicament. "Hubris" and greed, desire for domination and property, have ruined the human race and its environment, exposing us and all life to the risk of extinction.

The religions of the world have now to work together to redeem humanity from its present precarious predicament. We need to liberate humanity from the secular trap in which it has been unconsciously caught. Modern science and the technology based on it, as well as the political economy that under-girds it, have developed in a secular framework where humanity as dominating subject and the world as passive object have been the only two factors that mattered. God or the transcendent has become an unnecessary hypothesis in our science and technology, in our universities and schools, and in our political institutions. This is the secular trap from which humanity needs emancipation. It is not simply a question of bringing God in through the window. Philosophical theisms are all too philosophically weak to stand. It is not simply at the intellectual or conceptual level that the Transcendent has to be reaffirmed. The various religions of the world have honored and cherished the experience of the transcendent throughout human history, despite the scathing secular attack. We have done so through our doctrines and practices, through our prayers and rituals, through our mystic quests and experiences, through our compassion for humanity and our devotion to the Source and Ground of all being. Of course, in religion, too, we have made a mess of things. We have made religion an instrument of our greed for political power and for economic advantage. We have allowed the most ungodly and inhuman practices in the name of religion. We have fought wars and destroyed each other in the name of God and religion. We have used our crusades and our "jihads" to plunder and pilfer the wealth of other peoples. Religion, too, needs emancipation.

We, as humanity, now stand alienated, by our own evil practices, from both poles of our existence: from the transcendent Source and Ground of our being, and from the earth and society in which we have been placed. The two redemptions, the overcoming of the two alienations, i.e., in the two realms of transcendent religion and humanitarian dealing with our earth — the double salvation for which humanity yearns — must become the top concern of the Global Concourse of Religions. The two emancipations can come only as a single package. It is only as our religions cease being negative and exclusive that our science/technology and our political economy can also become more human.

III. Three Concerns: A Supra-national Spirit, Security, and Science

Let me mention some of the areas where I think this Global Concourse of Religions will have to put some emphasis.

Let us Transcend National Loyalties!

First of all, ailing and alienated humanity is desperately in need of transcending national loyalties. For the last 200 years, the nation has often been our identity, and our loyalties have been to one's own nation's interests over against the interests of other nations. We will have to move out of this kind of identity. History is pushing us to move out of national parochialism into a universal humanism. That global perspective is in every country just beginning to break out, but the governments are not able to embody that principle. Governments still give higher priority to national interests than to human interests. There is where religion has to play a major role, in changing the very attitude of governments so that they no longer think of national interests except in the context of universal human interests. Religion must help each nation and people to move beyond national, tribal, regional parochialisms, to give priority to their global humanity over nation and region and race.

Let us Develop a Comprehensive Global Common Security!

A second thing to which humanity is aspiring is called "comprehensive global common security — C.G.C.S." This is a concept which the religions have to pick up and develop in the world. What does this mean? This means, first, security without weapons, security based on trust. We must move in that direction. We cannot go on arming ourselves to the teeth and destroying and wasting our resources in a blinding and senseless militarism, which pervades all nations in the world, including my own country, India. We must move out of the concept that it is behind the guns and rockets that one finds national security. We must move internationally towards that same kind of mutual trust by which people within one nation today trust each other and do not have to be pointing guns at each other in order to live in security. We must learn to trust each other, and to live in a global community as responsible citizens. Again, this means a fundamental shift in the way human beings think. I believe religion has a responsibility in moving the human race out of national patriotism to patriotism of the globe — the love of humanity, planetary patriotism.

Let us Liberate Science!

Let me say a third fundamental thing and then I shall stop. The hardest job that religions have is in liberating science and technology from being inhibiting factors and destructive factors. You know, in the medieval times, we black-robed clergymen had the final authority, at least in Europe. When there was a dispute, it was the clergy who gave the final verdict. That's gone, those days when one could say, "Roma locuta est, causa finita est," "Rome has spoken, the cause is finished." Today it seems that the role of the black-robed clergy is assumed by the white-robed scientist at his computer or in his laboratory, so that today the phrase is, "Scientia locuta est, causa finita est"; "Science has said the last word, nothing further can be discussed." I think just

as the clerical dictatorship of the medieval ages was overthrown, science's doctrinaire authoritarianism will have to be overthrown. But science itself cannot be abandoned. Science itself is the best tool that has come the way of man. Unfortunately, science and technology are now prisoners — prisoners of either profit-minded large corporations or destruction-minded defense establishments. They are the ones who finance science today, and they control research, and research is oriented either towards making a fast buck in business or the most effective way of exterminating people. Those are the two directions in which scientific research is now moving: making money for the corporations, or killing people. That is where the urban/technological culture we celebrated once has now led us. We must emancipate science, both from its authoritarianism and from its orientation toward profit and war. And there, again, I believe religions have a major role to play. But religions shall not attack science, only show science its limitations and its enslavement and try to emancipate it from its limitations, so that the same science and technology can now be applied to finding bread for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, clothing for the naked, transportation, communication — the basic needs of humanity. And in that process, science itself will become an ally of religion, not the hostile enemy of religion. And religion also will not have to regard science as an enemy, but as an ally.

Conclusion

That is the kind of orientation that I would like to see for a Global Concourse of Religions. But it shall not abandon its primary role, which the Upanishad spoke about: "Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, asato ma sad gamaya, mriyora ma amritam gamaya." That is, from darkness to light, from untruth to truth, from death to life. That is our primary orientation, but along with that, these three other orientations would have to be kept, and to that kind of vision, I beseech you, my beloved brothers and sisters, to give your commitment to act and your committed prayer.

To me, this is the vision that beckons. We shall not abandon critical reason, but we shall go beyond it to find a kind of reason that is more compassionate, more humane, more acknowledging of transcendence. We do not abandon our national loyalties, but we shall go beyond them to keep global human interests above our national interests. We do not abandon our own particular religious loyalties; but we shall deepen them in dialogue and concourse with other religions in order to find those deeper roots in each religion which affirm the unity of global humanity and which affirm the transcendent Love in which we all live and move and have our being. As I humbly inaugurate this opening of the Centenary celebrations, let us also move to common prayer that all humanity may be brought into a single concourse and all of us acknowledge together in various idioms the Transcendent Love, Wisdom and Power that really unites us

May God bless you!