

"RELIGION IS THE PROBLEM"

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said the banner circling high in the Denver sky over the Pope's head. I give it a 10 for melding truth, humor, & nonsense. It fits my mood as I prayerfully muse about the opening today of WPR II in Chicago, where near the newborn University WPR I assembled a century ago....In my hands as I muse are (1) the coin struck for the general occasion, inscribed "World's Exposition, 1893", & (2) the two volumes titled THE WORLD'S PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893, ed. by the Rev. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893)."

1 My approach to the riches of the WPR I papers is as prayerful as it is critical: the Holy Spirit, who tried to get through each of them to all of them, is trying to get through to me--& to you--through them.

Indirectly, a Confucian (I.409) honored truth in the same spirit as my approach. He quotes Kungfutzu (Lat., "Confucius"): "Those who agree with us are not for this reason right; those who differ with us are not for this reason wrong." He appeals to Jesus over missionaries to China who preach the West instead of the gospel. They (I.425) "often contend....that the Christian nations of the West owe their material well-being and political ascendancy to their religion....It is the end of every government, indeed, to strive after material prosperity and political ascendancy. Christ, however, proposes an entirely different end which is to seek the Kingdom of Heaven." What follows is an accurate display of Jesus' teaching, with Chinese parallels. He's not against Christian missions in his country: he's against missionaries who are unfaithful to their religion!

2 This letter (CCT 24Aug93) is in response to a lawyer who (17Aug93 CCT column) myopically focused on one category of human life, viz unwanted fetuses/embryos. How did I get from him to the Pope, who left Denver a few days ago? Whether or not the lawyer is a Roman Catholic, he & the Pope have the same natural-law mentality & at least in this sense share a religion which, as the aerial banner had it, "is the problem." My last ¶ is not liberal: liberals fight for the individual. It's radical: "we must rethink our legal, ethical, and religious systems." I hope WPR II helps us, the world, move in that direction.

Humans as a species the greater good

In his Aug. 16 column, lawyer Russell Redgate asks, "In all the visible world, is there any greater good than a human person?"

There is, but not according to our myopic 18th-century legal system, which so narrowly focuses on the individual that social tranquility and even civility are in perilous decline and a Robert Altman can walk free despite the BCCI-caused disappearance of \$15 billion.

Well, what is a greater good than the individual human being? Human beings as a species, including the health of the bio-support system we call the environment and the socio-support systems we call family and community.

Given Mr. Redgate's narrow focus on the fetus and narrow definition of abortion as "murder," we should not be surprised that he fails to see the greater good.

That failure is evil not in intention but in effect. Massachusetts is groaning with social problems, yet Mr. Redgate says that adding "nearly a million" unwanted children, instead of aborting them, would make only "a small difference." And he calls us hypocrites who are "bothered less by the deaths than by the lives of children."

He accuses us of non sequitur but is himself blind to the fact that "justice" without calculation of social consequences is a non sequitur.

Again, Mr. Redgate says "some hearts are so hardened as to view a child as nothing but a burden" interfering with "con-

temptible pleasure." I must reply that some brains are so softened as not to comprehend that that burden is not primarily vis-a-vis selfish pleasure but vis-a-vis social and biospheric health.

I adduce just one of many ominous realities: One-third of humanity does not have World Health Organization-standards potable water, and water quality is in steady global decline.

Nor does Mr. Redgate allude to the psychological factor, the law of supply and demand. Wherever human beings become too densely compacted, the quality of human life, and the value of the individual, decline.

Abstinence, contraception, and abortion combine against overpopulation and are therefore "pro-life."

While I honor the pope as a good man and a Christian leader, I sorrow that his preaching promotes so much unwanted human life.

A third of the world's women want contraceptives and can't get them, so have unwanted pregnancies.

Millions want abortions and can't get them, so have unwanted babies.

Millions of suffering elderly are living unwanted lives because of legal restraints against euthanasia.

It is time, past time, that we rethink our legal, ethical, and religious systems. Lacking this, there will be no "new world order" worth mentioning.

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3 The planners of WPR I were convinced of a **pluralism** of each giving a respectful & hopeful listening to all in global conversation without loss of Christocentrism. Eg, II.1569: The Parliament emphasized, "as the Liberals have so emphatically done, liberty, fellowship and character in religion;...the Catholic idea of a universal church and the desirableness of greater unity in religious organization;...the great Evangelical claim that the historic Christ is divine, the sufficient and only Saviour of mankind; but from the fact that it made conspicuous so many truths and phases of religion, the glory of it cannot be monopolized by any one division of the religious world." Here was at least a *pragmatic* pluralism: It was "the first opportunity...to see religion in its entirety and to apprehend its greatness. The Columbian Exposition which accentuated the material glories of modern civilization needed the Parliament of Religions to bring back to the human mind the greater world of the Spirit."....Of the ten participating religions among the 3,000 delegates (1572), "no religion excepting Christianity put forth any strong and serious claims to universality ¶The idea of evolving a cosmic or universal faith out of the Parliament was not present in the minds of its chief promoters. They believe that the elements of such a religion are already contained in the Christian ideal and the Christian Scriptures....men must be unified in other subjects before they will become one in their intellectual faith."

Pluralism as comprehensive awareness (1572): "The Parliament...awakened a new world-consciousness," teaching "humility," "mutual respect," mutual learning ("to help each other to see")....it was well for Christians to be humbled and rebuked, and it was equally wholesome for them to discover and gladly recognize the brighter side of so-called heathenism." And it boosted Christian ecumenism (1573, incl. ref. to Phillip Schaff): "the Parliament was itself the greatest blow in the present generation to schism and narrow Christian sectarianism."....1576: Christianity is "exclusive...the one Saviour of the world," but "it is also grandly inclusive, in the sense that it embraces within its scope all religious truths."....Jesus is (1582) "the unifier of humanity," & the Lord's Prayer was (1578) a daily part of the Parliament.

4 The pluralism of WPR I's Christian organizers & managers was cultural rather than theological: **Jesus** was proclaimed as the world unifier (eg II.1582). That of WPR II (Parliament of World's Religions, Aug.28-Sept.5, to be aired soon on VISN) will be theological: a plurality of theologies, all treated as of equal standing, with (I predict) no room for "Jesus only" (ie, exclusivistic claims). It will be one more instance of today's triumph of tolerance over truth. (In another connection, Geo. F. Will [29Aug93] speaks of "contemporary society's...muzzy notion of 'tolerance' that cannot distinguish between an open mind and an empty mind....know nothing, so they doubt everything except how sophisticated they are when they assume that nothing is certain.") Against the blind outrage (fanaticism) which is the hubris of truth, society & academy & the liberal church pose the intellectual anything-goes indifferentism which is the hubris of tolerance, which cancels the passion for truth & the search for a moral consensus to give society its needed boundaries for behavior and incentives to virtue, the ethical substance of citizenship in a free society.

5 Right after WPR I, Max Müller commented on its "open and solemn recognition" of "the [Christian] desire to be just to the non-Christian religions." Not just desire, I must add, but internal demand. Having just reviewed all the papers of WPR I, I can add further that there was Christian eagerness to learn from non-Christians, in the spirit of Ac.10, on which Lesslie Newbigin comments in "The Christian Faith and the World Religions" (310-340 of Geof. Wainwright, ed., KEEPING THE FAITH [Fortress/Pickwith/88]): "the true pluralism"; "the centrality of Christ, the cruciality of his...ministry, death, and resurrection for the entire human story."

6 By contrast, theological (I'll call it "egalitarian") pluralism correlates with a low view of the authority of Scripture. It's well laid out (& recommended!) in THE UNITED CHURCH EDUCATOR, V.2 (C.N.Ikuta, "Cultural Domination, the Bible, and Pluralism") & VI.1 (Ansley Coe Throckmorton's "Viewpoints"). This dismal relativism will doom WPR II to relative insignificance.