

From the love of power to the power of love

Somehow, a way has to be found to infuse the political process with ethical values of genuine peace and social justice while avoiding a charge by politicians that churchgoers are 'interfering.'

SECTIONS SEARCH



Former Liberal Senator Roméo Dallaire, former Progressive Conservative prime minister Kim Campbell, and former PC MP and Independent Senator Douglas Roche pose together at the Parliament of the World's Religions event earlier this month in Toronto. *Photograph courtesy of Douglas Roche*

Can religions play a role in strengthening the political will of governments to stop violence and wars, which continue to scar humanity? Or should religions, the cause of so much conflict in the past, stay out of government affairs today?

Two of Canada's leading political figures, former Progressive Conservative prime minister Kim Campbell and former Liberal Senator Romeo Dallaire, answered those questions at one of the largest religious conferences ever held in Canada, earlier this month.

The Parliament of the World's Religions marked its 125th anniversary, in Toronto Nov. 1 to 7, with an assembly of 7,000 persons from 212 religions in 70 countries. Although it was founded in 1893, the Parliament only began to function globally in 1993 when it published a Global Ethic committing its members to a culture of nonviolence, respect, justice, and peace: "We shall not oppress, injure, torture, or kill other human beings, forsaking violence as a means of settling differences."

It's not enough to uphold these values in our personal lives, Campbell and Dallaire told a panel at the Toronto gathering. Religions must work to stop violence against the climate and nature, violence posed by the new nuclear arms race, and violence of the forced migration of peoples. I participated in this panel, which sought to put the work of religions directly in the path of today's political storms.

“Religions must advance human unity, not be distorted as stimulants for violence,” former prime minister Campbell said. “Religions have a duty and capacity” to infuse these values into political action, said Dallaire, who led United Nations forces in Rwanda in efforts to stem ethnic violence almost 25 years ago, which turned into genocide. I added that the two paramount issues of the 21st century, nuclear weapons and climate change, are deeply moral issues and ought to be at the forefront of all religious messages.

Thus we urged the Parliament to update its Global Ethic statements with ringing calls for religious action to push governments to resolve the nuclear and climate threats. But, as one of my friends said to me, do governments care what religions say when religions are so divided and, through corruption and rivalry, are losing their moral authority to speak?

This fundamental question bogs us down in the inadequacies of churches. There is no doubt about these inadequacies, yet the core spiritual message of love and caring desperately needs to be injected into public policies that condone nuclear weapons, allow pollution of the earth, and cause the suffering of migrants because of economic and social disparities that ought to be ended by the full implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is a preposterous notion that religious leaders

ought not to get their hands dirty by directly addressing the political policies that maintain nuclear weapons, allow global warming, and force people to leave their homes.

In the past, when religion identified itself with the state in a cozy relationship that benefited both, the results were disastrous. In the secularism of our times, the state keeps a wall between itself and religion. And maybe vice versa. Somehow, a way has to be found to infuse the political process with ethical values of genuine peace and social justice while avoiding a charge by politicians that the churchgoers are "interfering."

Personally, I subscribe to the masterful [encyclical](#) "Peace on Earth" of Pope John XXIII, who extended open arms to the world: "The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities."

People have a right to authentic human development, and this core global ethic needs to be pronounced in every generation. So religious institutions of all shapes and sizes should back stringent laws to stop global warming, eliminate nuclear weapons, and protect people forced off their lands.

Developing a global ethic for human security needs to involve more than institutional statements. It also calls for some individuals to put their lives on the line in confronting authorities who persecute and prosecute displaced

peoples. One of the Parliament's panels, led by Mary Jo Leddy, who founded Romero House in Toronto, dealt with the principles of the sanctuary movement, which seeks to protect displaced people from deportation. Giving people at risk of being killed if they are sent back to their countries sanctuary in a church certainly challenges the law. But a compassionate response is needed to bring restorative justice to migrants and refugees fleeing from unjust systems, Leddy said.

The Parliament had many speakers who are the personal embodiment of religious courage, including: Sakena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning, which offers leadership training to Afghan women; Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Palestinian-Canadian physician whose three daughters were killed in the 2009 Gaza war and who has become an inspirational peace activist; and Swami Agnivesh, known in India as the "cyclonic swami" for his inter-religious social justice work.

They all spoke on a panel, "Countering War, Hate and Violence," urging religions to overcome their history of violence and promote peace, tolerance, and compassion.

Jonathan Granoff, an American who heads the Global Security Institute, summed up the theme of the Parliament's work in dealing with recalcitrant governments: "Religions must help the world to move from the love of power to the

power of love."

Former Independent Senator and author Douglas Roche was a speaker at the Toronto conference of the Parliament of the World's Religions.

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