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Parliament focuses on Charter for Compassion

Edmund Chia | Dec. 9, 2009

Karen Armstrong

?We must, in the words of the theme of the Parliament, make a world of difference, we need to be bridge builders and move beyond toleration to truly enjoying our religious differences,? declared Karen Armstrong by video telecast to the delegates of the Parliament of the World?s Religions who are convening in Melbourne from 3-9 Dec 2009.

The highly acclaimed British author of bestsellers such as A History of God, The Battle for God, and the recently released book A Case for God called upon all people to draw up a ?Charter for Compassion? which would apply shared moral priorities to foster greater global understanding, reconciliation, and peace. ?At a time when religions are at loggerheads with one another we need to bring them together to promote this aspect of religion, which is compassion,? Armstrong continued.

She then introduced the Charter for Compassion project [1], which is a ?grassroots movement of people interested and involved in religion? so that ?the voice of extremism can be drowned out by compassionate voices.? Armstrong hopes that ?if all the world?s religious people can come together on this we could turn the world around.?

The Charter is by no means a creed or a belief or a mere statement, but ?a summons to action.? ?The world,? she warned, ?is so dangerously polarized? that we have little choice but ?to work together to bring the Charter into reality.? This is ?the Jihad, the struggle, the effort, the endeavor, for all of us, which is to make the Charter the center of our world?s agenda? she concluded.

Malaysian political scientist Chandra Muzaffar then clarified that compassion ?is a shared ethic that transcends religious traditions.? It is also ?not just a question of attitude but must go beyond,? he argued. More importantly, Muzaffar proposed, ?we cannot just go around preaching compassion if we don?t deal with the challenges of structures, the root causes of suffering, and especially the issue of wealth and power.?

Muzaffar, who is president of the International Movement for a Just World, acknowledged that this ?is going to be a long and hard struggle and will require education, the cooperation of the schools, the media, and the religious institutions.? ?They must be mobilized to the hilt,? Muzaffar adjoined, ?and at a time when technology is bringing people together, can compassion also bring us together??

The Swiss-born Arab Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan weighed in on the discussion by suggesting that this Charter for Compassion is ?not only a personal commitment but a collective one? as well. In actualizing the Charter, Ramadan insists, ?we cannot act as if no judgment needs to be made; instead, we must pronounce judgment upon certain situations, especially to condemn power and wealth where they are used against compassion.?

For example, Ramadan suggested, ?if 50% of the people in America endorse torture, then that needs to be condemned.? However, he cautions against ?reducing people to the judgments we make against their behaviors.? ?Their acts may not be acceptable,? Ramadan counsels, ?but we cannot dismiss them and their traditions.? Compassion, in short, is love expressed with justice.

The final panelist, Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, a NCR columnist, arrived some minutes late but quickly explained that she was held up ?as PBS wanted me on air and I would do anything to get our message out to the wider world.? She then illustrated what compassion meant with a story: A young man was very impressed with his new wife and asked why God had made her so nice. God?s response was ?so you will love her, my son.? Again he asked why God had made her so beautiful. God?s response was ?so you will love her, my son.? Yet again he asked why God had made her such a good cook. God?s response was ?so you will love her, my son.? Finally he asked why God had made her so dumb. God?s response was ?so she will love you, my son.?

Chittister explained that ?we are all configured for compassion through the limbic system but many of us have evolved out of it.? Our task, therefore, is to reclaim what rightly belongs to our human nature. ?Since we are so out of touch with compassion,? Chittister advised, ?we must practice it.? And it is when more people put it into practice that compassion becomes a norm for whole communities and entire societies. ?The people will have to take the lead in this,? Chittister asserts, ?the leaders will follow.?

This movement towards promoting compassion was expressed in various ways at other sessions of the Parliament. For example, an audiovisual presentation on ?The Many Faces of Peace? was held which drew attention to the constructive steps taken by artists, educators, musicians, religious leaders, athletes and statesmen who were all contributing to mobilizing compassion in their own stations of life. Likewise, the World Premiere film ?Compassion Rising? was shown, depicting the historic encounter between the Trappist monk Thomas Merton and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

There was even a session entitled ?Compassionate Eating for the YouTube Generation? and another entitled ?The Compassionate Approach to Market and Money,? and yet others entitled ?Securing Food and Water for all People: The Compassion of a Qur?an Based Approach? and ?The Zoroastrian Ethos of Compassion.?

It is the hope of Karen Armstrong and the Council of Conscience (a multi-religious and multi-national group of religious thinkers and leaders responsible for the Charter) and all those who have signed the Charter since the project was unveiled on Nov 12, 2009 that these sessions will be multiplied exponentially at every platform around the globe so that an ethos of compassion will emerge and eventually become the norm and guiding principle of all peoples everywhere.

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Links:
[1] http://charterforcompassion.org/