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American Academy of Religion forgets what's important

by Ian Linden

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Ian Linden, director of policy at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation

Opinion

Ian Linden, director of policy at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, gave this report on the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting Nov. 19-23 in San Francisco. The AAR is the world's largest gathering of religious scholars.

What do you call 10,000 theologians, religious studies professors and religious booksellers? A disputation of theologians? A proliferation of professors? A sub-angelic host?

About 10,000 people traveled to San Francisco for the 2011 American Academy of Religion annual jamboree.

I haven't seen so many elderly white-bearded men in one place before. It's enough to create an identity crisis. And if you have ever published a book on an even marginally religious topic, seeing about an acre of them all in one place is kind of depressing. How many commentaries on the Gospels can the secular world take before it capitulates and surrenders? Dropping them all on Richard Dawkins would bury him a mile under.

Just the place to promote the interdisciplinary theme of "faith and globalization," you might think. Well, yes, the three Tony Blair Faith Foundation seminars were well attended and the numbers rose with each seminar: The second saw more than the first, and the third was the biggest, so it was not just punters

coming to see what we were up to inside and outside the Groves of Academe. The discussion was lively, particularly on secularism and religion in the public square, where the Indian, Iranian and Quebec speakers showed just what a diminished and parochial conversation Europe was having on the subject.

For those who fight against a pejorative opposition between "ivory tower academics" and "dumb activists" (as if academics are never engaged and activists are invariably knee-jerk dummies), this was not a reassuring gathering. Out of a truly prodigious array of themes and sessions, there was just one I could find on religion and development (otherwise called well-being and human flourishing). And I knew almost half the people there.

It's not that I have anything against the study and problems of transgender Mormons, but whether religion might be an important factor in healing, health systems and, yes, human flourishing, doesn't seem to deserve a comparable one-off ranking in terms of attention given to it by 10,000 religious specialists. Call me old-fashioned if you like.

Sure, it's San Francisco, where even a Lefebvrist bishop might want to chill out between a little Holocaust denial. But the participants only had to walk out of their hotels to trip over the homeless and destitute in the streets. Faces with poverty and suffering etched into them looked up at you from cardboard beds in doorways. One man, hood up and slumped so you couldn't see his face, looked for all the world like a Guy Fawkes made by kids. Another fed a tiny dog with meticulous loving care on the sidewalk next to a fancy dress shop. All of this, next to shops worthy of Milan. The gap between rich and poor is far, far worse than anything in Europe's big cities.

Maybe, just maybe, the academy had something theologically relevant to say about this appalling disparity in wealth and well-being. But it was hard to find.

In the land of Cesar Chavez and Dorothy Day, this is, to say the least, surprising. In retrospect, the collective term should probably be "an amnesia of theologians."

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