Conference

A REPORT ON THE XVIIth INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

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The International Congress on the History of Religions took place, for the first time in its history, in a Latin American country. Mexico was the selected site for the XVIIth meeting. The dynamic of social and political change which this country is presently undergoing influenced both the form and the content of the Congress; the general theme was "religion and society." Significantly, on some of the days of the Congress we heard behind the walls the voices of social unrest chanting their protests. Religionists congegated there learned and recognized the interconnection between religion and politics.

Traditionally, the congresses of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) are organized in sections representing specific areas of the study of religions and serving also as main headings of the program. The IAHR's past emphasis on historical and philological methods for the study of religions is reflected in such area sections. During the preparation of this XVIIth Congress the focus was broadened to include the interactions and the internal dynamics of religious systems with changing social and cultural contexts.

In his inaugural address, Michael Pye, Secretary General of the IAHR, stressed that

...the way religion is studied in various regions of the world is rather different. The Latin American context is very special because of its unique history of the Spanish Conquest and the mixing of social groups ever since.

Mexico, he claimed, was an ideal site for the Congress, on the one hand because of the Catholic Church's role in political conflicts, and on the other hand because of the recent emergence of new religious influences, such as Protestant groups. He saw our contemporary religious reality as the perfect background for a congress that focuses on the interactions between religion and society.

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Elio Masferrer, Executive Secretary of the Congress, stressed that the conference would take a more humanistic rather than theological approach to the subject of religion and its role in society.

The week-long conference took place in the Claustro de Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. A beautiful XVIIth Century convent of the order of Jeronimas nuns, where the celebrated Mexican poet and literary luminary of that century wrote some of her more celebrated prose. An intense intellectual and a woman of special physical beauty, she chose to retire to a convent to enjoy the time and recollection needed for her work. The atmosphere of those cloisters continued in the present to offer a suitable context for the more than 800 presentations divided among some 100 symposia.

It is impossible to render an exhaustive review of an event of such magnitude. I will simply highlight broadly some themes and events that were amenable to my personal involvement or participation.

Thematically, the symposia clustered mainly around certain pressing issues in the study of religions and their socio-political impact. Some of these clusters were: the grip, on contemporary societies, of the process of construction of new religions; the study of recent forms of fundamentalism and their political implications; the shaping force of gender on religions; theoretical perspectives for the study of religions; the interrelationship between medicine, shamanism, and religions; syncretism reconsidered in its conceptualization and its application to concrete cases.

As in previous congresses, some presentations were grouped both by regions of the world and by the specific religious systems under scrutiny. Religious state and society in Africa, chaired by J. Olupona and A. Tayob, was an example.

The following is an excerpt from the symposia’s list:

*New Religious Movements*, chaired by Elio Masferrer and Lourdes Baez;

*Ethnic-Religious Movements*, chaired by Jorge Hernandez Diaz;

*Charismatic Groups*, chaired by Eva Pizano;


These particular symposia focused specially on the contemporary religious scene with its multiple manifestations of new religious configurations that exemplify the varied, contradictory, and sometimes incomprehensible ways in which urban and rural populations integrate different religious influences.