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Looking for God at the Milan Expo (Part 2) ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This blog is part two of a two-part series. Part one can be found [here](#).*

In contrast to the Palestinian offering, the Israel pavilion was more guarded in its treatment of religion. The pavilion had an immense illuminated photo wall on its outside with giant images of a beautiful Israeli field and the label 'Israel: Fields of the Future.' The images shifted, and only at some points the display included a quote from the book of Ezekiel. While the pavilion's concept plainly evoked the ancient perception of a Land of Milk and Honey, this was not part of the main thrust of the pavilion, which positioned Israel as an inheritor of a rather unpromising piece of real estate, which bloomed because of the sweat and technology of 'stubborn people' which those people were now prepared to share with the world. The Holy Land dimension was featured only as part of an invitation to enter a competition to win a holiday at the entrance. Israel's approach was to avoid reference to the ongoing conflict over the Palestinian question, and offer an unrelated narrative of Israel's relevance to the world as an example of agricultural innovation and a 'granary of knowledge.' Who could object to a country which invented drip irrigation and the cherry tomato and generously shared these innovations with the world, more especially when the whole show is presented by a glamorous Italian TV star of Israeli origin? It would be fascinating to know if this pavilion succeeded in its mission in reminding Italians that there was more to Israel than the conflict, or if the deliberate non-engagement of Israel's current troubles in some way unsettled audiences.

The Vatican and Israel were not the only national participants whose polities have a special relationship with religion. A number of contemporary nation states integrate religious claims into their domestic politics and international image. Iran is the most obvious example. North Korea presents itself as a heaven on earth, albeit for an atheistic regime. The assertion of Orthodox Christianity is an important part of Putin's rhetoric in Russia, and Buddhism is an important element in the state's narrative in Thailand. In Milan, Russia avoids any whiff of the Patriarch's incense in a cheerful pavilion that celebrates Russian food and agronomic heritage. The most publicly devout of modern European countries -- Poland -- presents a pavilion with little time for the food theme, but prominently featured an 'Animated history of Poland,' which included many religiously charged scenes of crosses and churches rising intercut with surging battles. From the Buddhist world, Thailand integrates plenty of monks along with flying golden dragons into its pavilion movie, but devoted its climax to a final presentation about the virtues of its king. With a final montage of the King supervising agricultural projects in the rain to prove he worked in all weathers, this is the most sustained piece of preaching at the Expo.

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Wholly beneath the religious radar, Islamic countries -- Iran included -- underplayed their religious heritage. Many Middle Eastern pavilions include gardens featuring regional plants and specifically note those mentioned in the Koran, but without moralizing. The Kuwaiti pavilion stresses the state's involvement in charity around the world and makes a big deal of Kofi Annan's recent recognition of the Emir as a great humanitarian, but this is not tied to his religious heritage or obligation of Zakat (almsgiving).

Some Latin American countries made roundabout reference to native traditions of sustainability or wisdom, without delving into its religious underpinnings. The exception was Mexico, which included alongside features on Mexico's thriving industry, works of art referencing pre-Columbian religious tradition with minimal interpretation. The most striking -- a painting called The Mother Tree by Daniel Lezama -- has as a central motif a naked, two-headed woman giving birth to a stream of what looked like green salsa. It was a worthy successor to the polychrome statue of the Madonna with a sword stuck in her, which so baffled fairgoers in Mexico's pavilion at the Shanghai Expo.

As for my worry in Shanghai that environmentalism was becoming a new dogma to be recited rather than debated, Milan eased my concern. Many of the pavilions include messages inviting collaboration and co-participation in a shared approach to resolving agricultural and nutritional issues -- UAE even presents a song/rap on the theme. The ethos of the expo is summed up in a Milan Charter, located as part of the fabulous Italian pavilion which invites fairgoers to commit to principles of working for fairness in food and the elimination of waste (amongst other goals). The same themes were present in the magnificent pavilion 'zero,' located by the expo entrance and offered under the auspices of the UN. Perhaps it is the implicitly social nature of food in so many cultures which steered so many pavilions towards these collective approaches. All in all, it seemed like a more mature and fertile way of dealing with the subject than had been evident in Shanghai, and one which is cause for relief and perhaps even cautious optimism. It is long overdue.
