

## **Parliament of the World's Religions: Lessons The Religious Imperative to Present**

On my second morning at the Parliament for the World's Religions, I attended a session entitled "The Religious Imperative to Present 'The Other' Faithfully." This was a panel discussion facilitated by Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein, the head of an organisation called the Elijah Interfaith Institute. His group has taken on the commendable task of updating our faith's theologies to match our personal desires to honour that the holy in each other's religions. Nifty idea. But the panel discussion itself was a maddening experience. First of all, Rabbi Goshen-Gottstein kept inserting himself into the conversation, trying to steer the other panellists in the direction he thought they should go. More infuriating was the fact that there were seven panellists participating in the discussion, and they were all men. By this time, the fact that such intellectually-heavy panels were dominated by men was really beginning to get to me. After listening to the introductory statements, I walked out.

I looked through the massive 400-page program book, and randomly selected a forum hosted by the eminent Catholic theologian Hans Kung. Professor Kung was one of the very few non-Jewish speakers at the parliament who I'd actually heard of. I admit the topic was somewhat daunting to me. It was "Manifesto of a Global Economic Ethic." The session itself, at least the 45 minutes that I attended, was actually quite inspiring. I'd grown accustomed to session rooms set up to resemble university lecture halls: a table across the front of the room, and neat rows of chairs facing the front. By contrast, this room had a welcome sense of organised chaos. Four seats were arranged in a circle in the centre of the room, and concentric circles of chairs were crammed in around them. Latecomers stood around or sat on the floor. Professor Kung had apparently opened his session up to comments from the audience, who rotated through the chairs in the inner circle and passed the microphone around. I learned that early in the session, a woman had sat down in the one of the chairs and announced that this chair was now reserved for women speakers—a move that drew enthusiastic cheers.

It's disorienting to slide into a session that is already half over, particularly since I was completely unfamiliar with the material under discussion. I listened to speaker after speaker passionately addressing what I would summarize as a sense of imbalance: a disquieting feeling that something is deeply wrong with our world. For some, it was an issue of the misuse of power, whether by governments or by multinational corporations. For others, it was concern for the fate of the planet, which is being steadily ground down by those who would exploit its resources without any effort at moderation or replenishment. To paraphrase Shakespeare, something is rotten with the state of the world.

Upon my return to Adelaide, I did a quick internet search for the manifesto I'd heard about at the Parliament. I learned that the [manifesto](#) is only six-pages long and is freely available on the web. It is a tightly-written document, translated from the original German into a number of European languages. While it is not exactly easy reading, it is relatively accessible and outrageously sensible.

Professor Kung lays a finger on the source of that dis-ease that was the core of the discussion I attended. Our current world is increasingly constructed to place profits at the heart of what drives it. From time to time, we may step back from our lives and reflect on just how much we ourselves are pushed, pulled and manipulated by advertisers and marketers who are hoping to derive ever greater profits through our purchases. China's industrial engines poison its air and pour huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere for the sake of increased profits. Oil and gas companies subjugate and even enslave peoples in third world countries in the name of profits. Many of us realise on a primal level that this is not how life was meant to be. Professor Kung points out that the recent global economic crisis—in which corruption combined with shameless profiteering brought the world's economies to the brink of collapse—highlights how unbalanced our global priorities have become.

The Manifesto for a Global Economic Ethic states very simply that human beings should be at the centre of the equation—not profits. Any business venture, whether tiny or enormous, should exist primarily to serve the needs of humanity and to move all people of the world towards a time of greater prosperity, justice, and

happiness. It states, “The ethical goal of sustainable economic action...is the creation of a fundamental framework for sustainably fulfilling human beings’ basic human needs so that they can live in dignity. For that reason, in all economic decisions the uppermost precept should be that such actions always serve the formation and development of all the individual resources and capabilities that are needed for a truly human development of the individual and for living together happily.” The manifesto goes on to address the ideas of respect for life, justice and solidarity, honesty and tolerance, and mutual esteem and partnership.

None of this is rocket science. The Torah itself has a firm sense that human beings should be the subjects of an economic system, rather than the objects. Deuteronomy 24 insists that employers pay their labourers on the day they work rather than holding their wages overnight. “You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it.” The Torah, and the Talmud after it, understand that religious values have a crucial role to play in the world of commerce. In recent years, we have moved away from this understanding. As the effect of globalization are keenly felt, particularly in the poorest countries, economists insist that the world economy needs to function in an ethical vacuum. We who believe adequate legislation should exist to protect workers in all countries are misguided and need to believe that eventually magical market forces will bring everything into balance. Judaism—and all other religious faiths—disagree. It is not people who should serve the market, but the market that should serve people. I admire Professor Kung’s assertion that ethics is a crucial voice in the discussion. It is clear that the current direction of the world’s economy is not the right one. We who come from great religious traditions have something crucial to contribute to the conversation.