

# Re-Creating Eden

by Carl Teichrib

From July 7th to the 13th, 2004, Barcelona Spain was the focal point for this year's largest interfaith event, the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions. And while this conference received practically no media coverage in North America, it was a major mile-stone in a lineage of interfaith events.

The history of the Parliament of the World's Religions goes back over 100 years to 1893. That year, the first World's Parliament of Religions took place as part of the World Columbia Exposition in Chicago. Thousands attended, and the gathering became a seminal event in American religious life, "marking the change from the dominance of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism to the start of a multi-religious society" (Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*, p. 41).

Richard Seager, in his Harvard University Doctrinal Thesis on the 1893 Parliament, further elaborated on this national religious turnaround,

As far as religious pluralism in America is concerned a strict construction of the issue would seem to suggest that after the Parliament, there were many ways to be religious. One could be saved or self-realized or grow in God consciousness or be self-emptied. And as America itself continued to pursue its messianic mission, it was a nation under a changed God. Krishna, Vishnu, the Buddha (technically a not-God), the Divine Mother, and other deities had been tucked up in the nation's sacred canopy, where they joined the Christian Father and Son, Jehovah, Nature's God, and Apollo and his Muses... (see *Pilgrimage of Hope*, p. 41)

One hundred years later, in 1993, the second Parliament of the World's Religions took place—once again in Chicago. And like the first Parliament, this event drew thousands of participants from practically every major and minor stream of thought, philosophy, and spiritual persuasion.

Erwin Lutzer, author and well-known Christian apologist, attended this event with a critical eye. Writing on what he witnessed, Lutzer commented, "The gods are on a roll, and woe to those who stand in the way of their agenda! With lofty ideals and utopian plans to unify the religions of the world for the common good, this parliament met to break down the barriers that exist in the accelerated march toward unity" (Erwin Lutzer, *Christ Among Other gods*, p. 11)

Setting the stage for deeper interfaith collaboration, the 1993 Parliament spurned a landmark directive; the creation of a Global Ethic.

Blending various aspects of many religious traditions, the basic idea behind the Global Ethic was and is to unite all religions around a common core set of moral and ethical values. To this end, the 1993 Parliament was especially significant, as the drive towards a Global Ethic elevated inter-religious cooperation to new heights.

In 1999, on the eve of the new millennium, the third Parliament of the World's Religions took place in Cape Town, South Africa. Again, thousands attended. However, when the Parliament concluded it was evident that a new direction for interfaith cooperation had been formulated. Unlike the past two events, which had a heavy emphasis on religious unity, the South African conference produced a remarkably political agenda.

Titled, *A Call to Our Guiding Institutions*, the final report from Cape Town stressed that Earth-centric changes needed to take place within governments, religious institutions, labor and industry, education, science, the international political community, and in other areas such as commerce and media. It was a call for "global interdependence" and "robust cooperation within the human family." All of this was to take place within a framework of interfaith understanding where Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the other alternative spiritual paths could unite around a "better world" concept.

And then came this year's Parliament of the World's Religions.

Peak attendance at Barcelona topped 8,600, with participants coming from all corners of the world and representing an enormous range of religious beliefs and practices. Prominent interfaith organizations were also present, including the United Religious Initiative, which had approximately 150 of its global leaders partaking in the event (URI also had two information booths set up).

Arguably one of the most important aspects of this parliament was the vast amount of networking which took place. Throughout the week, interfaith advocates and organizations built bridges and came together in striking formal and informal partnerships with other likeminded groups and individuals. More importantly, Barcelona afforded an opportunity to build upon the aspirations of each of the prior parliaments.

From its start until its close, participants worked to put in place a number of political commitments, including the role of religious communities in addressing international debt and financial governance, and to support water management programs that ultimately work hand-in-glove with the World Water Vision [an international water management action plan]. Religious violence and tolerance were also recognized as a major area of political action, recognizing that the world's religions play a part in shaping social policies and directives.

Dirk Ficca, the Executive Director of the Parliament of the World's Religions, explained what political interconnections would be sought in order to implement the commitments made during the week.

The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions has also developed a process to monitor and support the implementation of the Barcelona Parliament commitments, including best-practice manuals and a web-based communications network in order to support and assess the impact on the world's pressing problems. We are also exploring partnerships with other sectors of society such as organizations within the UN system, the World Bank and organizations that promote corporate social responsibility. [See, *The Parliament Of The World's Religions Results In Thousands Of Commitments To Address Religious Violence And Other Urgent Issues Facing The World*, [www.cpwr.org/2004Parliament](http://www.cpwr.org/2004Parliament)]

Here is where the rubber meets the road—a commitment to impacting global political decision-making via the unified lobbying influence of the international religious community. Ultimately, it's man's plan to remake the world in man's image. Consider two statements from the first World's Parliament of Religions,

- The religion of the future will be universal in every sense. It will embody all the thought

and aspiration and virtue and emotion of all humanity; it will draw together all lands and peoples and kindreds and tongues into a universal brotherhood of love and service; it will establish upon earth a heavenly order. (Merwin-Marie Snell, "Future of Religion," *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions*, 1893, p. 174).

- Religion will then, as now, lift man above his weakness by reminding him of his responsibilities. The goal before is Paradise. Eden is to rise. (Emil Gustav Hirsch, "Elements of Universal Religion," *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions*, 1893, p. 224).

And, from 2004 Barcelona Parliament of the World's Religions:

The relentless effort of the Council for the Parliament of World Religions brings religious leaders within one platform and calls upon us to fulfill the highest purposes of religion. We come from the four directions, like streams merging into a great river. We are all on our way home to the Ocean of the One Divine Spirit... Let each of us come, willing to be immeasurably enriched by the beauty, depth and validity of one another's traditions. With each encounter, let us meet the Divinity in one another. (His Holiness Swami Shuddhanandaa Brahmachari, 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions, Opinion piece, "*The Needle and Thread*")

None of this should come as a surprise to the discerning Christian. Rather, expect more of this type of activity as man seeks to re-create Eden into a New Age paradise where humanity sits enthroned—alongside the gods of nature.

But of course, none of this is "new."

And none of this surprises God.