

# Consensus

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Volume 45  
Issue 2 *Festschrift in honour of the Rev. Dr.  
Gordon Jensen*

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Article 18

7-25-2024

## Faith as Protest: Answering the Call to Mend the World

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### Recommended Citation

Gunn, Joe (2024) "Faith as Protest: Answering the Call to Mend the World," *Consensus*: Vol. 45: Iss. 2, Article 18.

DOI: 10.51644/VKWX2377

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol45/iss2/18>

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## Book Review

### **Faith as Protest: Answering the Call to Mend the World**

Compiled and edited by Karen A. Hamilton

Toronto: Novalis Publishing, 2023

Come on now—let’s be honest. If you frequent a faith community of any description, do you go so that you can “protest”? The starkly arresting title of this book leads the attentive reader to immediately question the editor’s chosen frame. Who among us goes to church, synagogue, mosque or temple to protest?

I admit to never having thought of my own regular Sunday attendance as a form of protest. I have been much more likely to attend services because of the culture in which my parents raised me, and as part of my search for meaningful and sacramental liturgies, good music, reflective prayer time, and community fellowship. Frankly, the only “protest” I remember hearing after Mass attendance came from my young son, who was once forced to skip hockey practice on a Sunday morning. The irreverent lad’s memorable complaint was: “Church is boring. It’s for people with no life. Like Dad!”

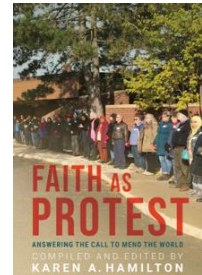
Yet, the editor of this collection of interviews is a notable leader in interfaith dialogue and practice. Karen Hamilton, an ordained minister in the United Church, is the former General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches and was co-chair of the 2018 Parliament of the World’s Religions. In the book’s Introduction, Hamilton explains her choice of title:

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, in his book *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, entitled the second chapter “Faith as Protest.” He was fully aware of all the reasons through centuries and millennia that faith has not been seen or practiced in that way. However, he firmly believed that the Holy One called biblical figures ... to protest injustice and pain and to act for healing and the mending of the world (*Tikkun Olam*). This is the Holy One’s call to those interviewed in the book. This is the Holy One’s call to us all (pg. 13).

How did Hamilton illustrate this point? She undertook ten interviews with Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Baha’i leaders involved in acting for justice. She asked each interviewee where there had been progress in the formidable social issues they had been tackling, and she asked how were faith communities making a difference.

Some chapters—certainly valuable—are generally unknown historical records in themselves. These include (sometimes rather self-referential) descriptions of a community’s responses to various crises—events like the Armenian genocide (1915), the persecution of Baha’is in Iran (leading to sponsorship of many to Canada starting in the 1980s), Hindus taking climate action at COP26 (2021) or moving official Roman Catholic teaching after the Second Vatican Council (1965) away from being “equal opportunity discriminators.”

I was most impressed by several chapters that provide clarity of analysis concerning collaborative interfaith action on struggles in Canadian society today. For example, a Metis Anglican bishop, Riscylla Shaw, states forthrightly that the Christian churches and Canadian



government made compulsory attendance of Indigenous children at Indian residential Schools (from 1894 to 1947) “not ultimately (for) the education of children but the clearing of Indigenous Peoples from the land so others could have access to its wealth” (pg. 82). She challenges the reader to think about the rediscovery and revelation of unmarked graves at the former residential school in Kamloops (May 2021) as “the continuing revelation of the Good News of Christ incarnate in the world” (pg. 85)—a revelation that must lead to *metanoia*, repentance, restitution, restoration, and recompense. (I have not met many members of the churches that administered residential schools who see reconciliation work as “the Good News.”)

An example of (perhaps unexpected) refreshingly honest self-criticism arises in an interview concerning human trafficking. A senior officer of the Salvation Army admits that the work of her tradition is often seen to be humanitarian in nature, so that “over time we lost our human rights and social justice bite” (pg. 29). This is unfortunately true of many institutional churches in Canada. In another chapter on racism in his tradition, a General Secretary of the United Church decries how people of colour have been “made to be exotic” (pg. 39). His insightful conclusion is that this is not about individuals anymore but that racism “is about whole structures” (pg. 40).

Another forceful chapter begins with a child’s first unjust experience of “not feeling Canadian” (i.e., religious discrimination) when he was prohibited from carrying his kirpan (pg. 53). In 2006 the Supreme Court ruled in an 8-0 decision that this small sacred sword is not a weapon. Yet the only two places in Canada where there are complete prohibitions on the wearing of the kirpan are the Quebec National Assembly and the prison system (even airlines do not have a complete prohibition). Balpreet Singh notes that whereas Quebec’s Bill 21 (i.e., the banning of the niqab or other religious face/head coverings) may affect Jews and Muslims more than Sikhs, these faith communities are working together to counter this Bill, on-line hate speech, and white supremacist groups. As he concludes, “Secularism does not mean that faith cannot or should not have visible practices, symbols and expressions; it means that no one can infringe on one’s right to religious freedom. There can be no discrimination because of faith or lack of faith” (pg. 59).

The most impressive account in the entire collection, however, is the inspiring story of how a movement called the Rings of Peace first evolved among Jewish and Muslim adherents in Toronto. After the horrible assassinations at the Quebec Islamic Cultural Centre on January 29, 2017, Jews formed a Ring of Peace around a mosque. In response to the October 2018 shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Muslims formed Rings of Peace around four synagogues. Rabbis spoke in mosques for the first time, and a Ring of Peace was even formed around a Catholic Tamil parish in 2019.

Imagine heroic efforts to continue such an initiative in the present context of the devastating war in Gaza! One important prelude to dialogue today remains true: familiarity breeds empathy.

Of course, there are several truly contentious issues in interfaith dialogue—issues that leaders would prefer to ignore. One prime example is the role of women in leadership and ministries. But this collection includes an interview on the Canadian Council of Muslim Women’s work on the reinterpretation of the Qur’an. The CCMW argues that women have the right to wear (or not wear) the hijab (head scarf) and that equality, equity, and empowerment for Canadian Muslim women and girls is overdue. (As it is in all faith traditions and in society at large.)

Some of us not directly involved in theological interfaith dialogues might wonder if any progress is actually being made. A remark by a senior church leader may point us to renewed possibilities: perhaps by moving beyond religious dialogue to interfaith action based on concrete community needs and responses, we could fashion deeper cooperation among peoples of faith. “Interfaith collaboration gathers an influence, outside of its usual boundaries, to say enough is enough. If you call a meeting to talk about ecumenism in interfaith circles, you might get a few people showing up. But if you call a meeting (on a social issue of mutual concern) everybody may show up. The women certainly show up!” (pg. 32). In my own parish, this was lived out when we Christians invited Muslims to a halal meal, thanking them for their constant support of the Supper Table and food bank we host for the hungry of downtown Ottawa.

From this collection of interviews, I learned that in so many ways, *Tikkun Olam*, “the repair of the world,” understood as “faith as protest,” is certainly a terrific reason to invigorate, and participate in, faith communities.

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