



Roman Faces; photo, Jim Kenney

# Editors' Page

## Humans and the Climate

JIM KENNEY

The 2009 Copenhagen conference was hailed by almost no one. In the face of extraordinary evidence of impending global disaster, the world's greatest nations failed to come to agreement even on long-term strategy. Many blamed Barack Obama. Others focused on China. But in the blame-melee something vital was misplaced. The world's most influential nations were at last at the table, and their engagement was diffuse but palpable.

The elusive goal, of course, was a commitment to reducing carbon emissions to the level that would restrict atmospheric carbon to 350 ppm. Advocates of that threshold came away from the Copenhagen summit deeply disappointed that no "fair, ambitious, or legally binding global agreement" was forthcoming. But was Copenhagen a beginning?

If politics is the "art of the possible", then the Denmark meetings captured that spirit. Tiny island nations like Vanuatu embodied desperation and outrage. Larger nations were constrained by their political realities. The giants sought to preserve their competitive advantage. And in the end, the possible prevailed

and the 350 target disappeared.

These days, most thoughtful people acknowledge that climate change is real and here to stay. The controversy swirls around the issue of anthropogenesis. Is the extraordinary acceleration of planetary temperature rise driven by human activity? Scientists agree (at the 98% level) that it is. Politicians (especially in the U.S.) are divided (at the 50-50% level).

How is a thoughtful person to make sense of the climate divide? Bill McKibben puts it articulately and sensibly.

*We're already at 383 parts per million, and it's knocking the planet off kilter in substantial ways. So, what does that mean? It means... that we've gone too far. The last time the Earth warmed two or three degrees Celsius – which is what 450 parts per million implies – sea levels rose by tens of meters, something that would shake the foundations of the human enterprise should it happen again. And we're already past 350.*

*Does that mean we're doomed?  
Not quite. Not any more than  
your doctor telling you that your  
cholesterol is way too high means  
the game is over. Much like the  
way your body will thin its blood  
if you give up cheese fries, so  
the Earth naturally gets rid of  
some of its CO<sub>2</sub> each year. We  
just need to stop putting more in  
and, over time, the number will  
fall, perhaps fast enough to avert  
the worst damage.*

So, what are we to conclude? How do we shape an interreligious and intercultural response to human abuse of the planet? The obvious answer involves popular education. It means that those who know have the obligation to spread the word. To be human is to be inter-involved. I see you and we are at once intertwined. And then we see the world around us. We survey the horizon. We embrace it and we are transformed.

Humankind inter-exists with the larger planetary community. Evolving global politics is increasingly engaged with that radical fact. The Copenhagen question does not revolve around Euro- or Obama-politics. It finds its heart in our shared commitment to the air our children's children will breathe.

The science is not in doubt. But how do we reach out from physical certainty to socio-political energy? How do we move from knowing to acting? We're poised at that brink. First we pray. Then we reflect and meditate. Then we give voice.

The interreligious voice is beginning to be heard, resonating in a new understanding of the sacredness of the Earth and the stewardship of the human community. Climate has become a human project. Now we not only breathe in, but out.

Jim Kenney



## THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HINDUISM

*Interreligious Insight* is delighted to announce the publication of the long-awaited *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. The Chief Editor of the Project, Dr. K.L. Seshagiri Rao, is also Co-Editor of this Journal.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama will formally release the *Encyclopedia* on March 22-23, in Rishikesh, India, and many other revered spiritual leaders will officiate at the formal launch, during the sacred festival of the Maha Kumbha Mela.

A variety of Interfaith Events will accompany the celebration of the *Encyclopedia* release, which represents a scholarly milestone for students of Hinduism and the world's religions.