

Canberra Interfaith Forum

ANNUAL REPORT OF INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES
IN 2013 – 2014



CANBERRA INTERFAITH
FORUM Inc.

ORGANISED BY CANBERRA INTERFAITH FORUM AND
SUPPORTED BY THE ACT GOVERNMENT



Joy Burch MLA

MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING
MINISTER FOR DISABILITY, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
MINISTER FOR THE ARTS
MINISTER FOR WOMEN
MINISTER FOR MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS
MINISTER FOR RACING AND GAMING

MEMBER FOR BRINDABELLA

Promoting and strengthening our spiritual diversity



Congratulations to Canberra interfaith Forum for its commitment and work in promoting better understanding and relationships among members of our city's religious and spiritual organisations.

Canberra is a proud multicultural society whose citizens have cultural linkages to more than 200 countries across the globe, giving us a broad spiritual diversity.

Through recognising the common good in each spiritual belief, Canberra Interfaith Forum is helping to build strength and harmony in our community.

The many interfaith dialogues, workshops, seminars and discussion forums held since Canberra Interfaith Forum was established in 2010 have built common actions based on common goods.

These events have allowed for participation of different spiritual faith traditions, including Indigenous representatives and other beliefs, in an environment of open dialogue based on equality and mutual respect.

The ACT Government acknowledges the important and vital dynamic the Canberra Interfaith Forum has brought to our community.

May there be many more successes in the future. Congratulations to all involved with Canberra Interfaith Forum.

Yours sincerely



Joy Burch MLA
Minister for Multicultural Affairs

ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

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Annual Report of Canberra Interfaith Forum

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Canberra Interfaith Forum

Who we are

We, the Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF), are a group of people from 12 different spiritual traditions in the Australian Capital Territory: Baha'i; Buddhist; Brahma Kumaris; Christian; Hindu; Islam, Jewish; Pagan Awareness Network; Quakers, Sikh; Sathya Sai; and Sukyo Mahikari.

Our Vision

To encourage people living and working in harmony, respecting all cultures, races and spiritual traditions.

Our Mission

To work for interreligious peace and harmony and for social cohesion in Canberra and the ACT as well as upholding the universal values of religion and individual spirituality.

Our Objectives

- Promote open conversation between individuals of various spiritual traditions based on equality and mutual respect.
- Deepen knowledge, understanding and appreciation of various spiritual traditions.
- Demonstrate loving and effective relationships between peoples of various spiritual traditions.
- Share deeper spiritual insights and values in the community.
- Uphold and respect the right of all human beings to maintain and practise in harmony the spiritual traditions of their choice.
- Promote cooperative action involving participating spiritual traditions in the ACT.
- Participate appropriately in community events such as the Multicultural Festival and multifaith worship.
- Disseminate information on multifaith and relevant activities.

Our Activities

- Hosting and participating in interfaith public forums
- Organising interfaith events at ACT National Multicultural Festival.
- Visiting each other's places of worship
- Maintenance of CIF's 'Environment Meditation and Healing Garden', which is located at the eastern end of Grevillea Park just east of Clare Holland House (ACT Hospice)

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Interfaith Event at 2014 National Multicultural Festival

On Sunday 9 February 2014, the Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF) successfully organised an interfaith event at the National Multicultural Festival to promote cooperation and effective relations between different spiritual faith groups in the framework of the Multicultural Festival and foster better understanding and appreciation of each other's spiritual traditions. The Office of Multicultural Affairs provided CIF with an outdoor venue, a big tent with adequate facilities, in Civic Square to hold this interfaith event. The ACT Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Ms Joy Burch MLA, officially opened the interfaith event.



The 2014 February interfaith event included presentations of diverse spiritual/ ritual practices by representatives from 10 different faith groups; cultural performances by three community groups (Abinaya Dance Group; Punjabi Dance Group; and Mosaic Baptist Church congregations at Belconnen and Gungahlin); and a Corroboree Indigenous dance performance by the *Wiradjuri Echoes* Indigenous group (a brief outline of items included in this event is given below). CIF is very pleased about the positive contribution this interfaith event made to the 2014 Multicultural Festival and the success in demonstrating to the Canberra multicultural community of the richness and diversity of spiritual faith traditions in the ACT.

Spiritual and Cultural activities

1. **Welcome & Introduction-** *Dean Sabu Khan, Chair of Canberra Interfaith Forum*
2. **Welcome to Country** by Ngunnawal Elder *Aunty Agnes Shea*
3. **Official Opening of Interfaith Gathering** - *Ms Joy Burch MLA, Minister for Multicultural Affairs*
4. **Brief introduction to the Raja Yoga meditation**, then lead the audience in meditation – *by Brahma Kumaris Centre for Spiritual Learning*
5. **Demonstration of main spiritual practice of spirit/mind/body purification** - by radiating God's Light from the hand –*by Sukyo Mahikari Group*
6. **Presentation of Hymn Singing as an integral part of Tongan Christian worship** - *by Toe Talatalanoa Congregation, Canberra City Uniting Church*
7. **Brief introduction to Sathya Sai faith** - *by Sathya Sai Organisation*
8. **Corroboree Indigenous dance performance** - *by Wiradjuri Echoes group*
9. **Identity and ideology of Sikhism** – *by Canberra Sikh Community*
10. **Baha'i devotional service with a brief description of prayer in the Baha'i Faith** – *by the ACT Baha'i Community*
11. **Hindu Devotional dance** –*by Abinaya Dance Group, Vishnu Shiva Mandir*
12. **Islamic perspective of Adhan (call to prayer)**, followed by an explanation on a Muslim prayer – *by Diana Rahman*

13. **Brief introduction to Zen Buddhism and sitting & walking meditation** - *by Canberra Soto Zen Buddhist Group*
14. **The significance of Hindu chant “AUM”** – *by Jayanti Gupta*
15. **Songs and Music dedicated to praise, glory and honour** - *by Mosaic Baptist Church congregations at Belconnen and Gungahlin*
16. **Presentation of Bhangra Jammers** – *by Punjabi Dance Group*
17. **Brief outline of Quakerism**, followed by a short meditation practice session
- *by Shobha Varkey*
18. **Question and Answer session**



Meeting with Visiting Chinese Delegation

On 27 November 2013, members of the Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF) participated in a panel discussion with a visiting Chinese delegation from the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China. The delegation included a number of representatives of Chinese ethnic minorities. The State Ethnic Affairs Commission is responsible for the implementation of China's national policies, theories on nationality research and national education. It also supervises the implementation and perfection of regional national autonomy systems and the supervision and handling of matters related to the protection of rights and interests of minority nationalities.



This meeting and panel discussion were coordinated by the ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), facilitated by Mr Richard Beaton of OMA. This was CIF's second colloquium with a visiting Chinese Government delegation in 2013. Following a formal presentation given by Mr Harry Oppermann, the discussion between CIF and the Chinese delegation focused on the positive effects of Australia's religious diversity. Mr Oppermann is a member of the Canberra Jewish community and is an advisor to CIF (the text of his presentation on '*Australia: A Diverse Society - The Dreaming: Indigenous Spirituality*' is given below).

The participants of the panel discussion were:

Members of Chinese Delegation

Mr. Lan Haibin
Mr. Hou Wenlu
Mr. Xiang Yuandao
Mr. An Yujie
Mr. Mi Junwei
Mr. Xu Heshan
Mr. Li Qingguo
Ms. Huo Shenghong

Interfaith Representatives

Mr Dean Sahu Khan (Chair, CIF) - **Islam**
Dr Natalie Mobini - **Baha'i**
Dr Willie Senanayake - **Buddhism**
Reverend Ivan Roberts - **Christianity**
Mr Kanti Jinna - **Hinduism**
Mr Harry Oppermann - **Judaism**
Mr David Jenkins - **Pagan Awareness Network**
Ms Shobha Varkey - **Quakerism**

Mr. Zhou Yu

Mr. Zhang Wenqing

Mr. Chen Hao

Mr. Liu Qingyu

Mr Mohan Bhullar - ***Sathya Sai***

Mr Amardeep Singh - ***Sikhism***

Ms Jennifer Quinn - ***Sukyo Mahikari***

Australia: A Diverse Society - The Dreaming: Indigenous Spirituality by *Harry Oppermann*

The Dreaming for Australian Indigenous people (sometimes referred to as the Dreamtime or Dreamtimes) is when the Ancestral Beings moved across the land and created life and significant geographic features.

The Dreaming, or 'Tjukurrpa', also means to 'see and understand the law' as it is translated from the Arrernte language (Frank Gillen with Baldwin Spencer, translating an Arrernte word *Altyerrenge*).



Dreaming stories pass on important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems to later generations. Through song, dance, painting and story-telling which express the dreaming stories, Aborigines have maintained a link with the Dreaming from ancient times to today, creating a rich cultural heritage.



Aboriginal dancers telling Dreamtime stories at the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony (Image source unknown)

Aborigines have the longest continuous cultural history of any group of people on Earth. Estimates date this history between 50,000 and 65,000 years. Before European colonisation/settlement of Australia, there were around 600 different Aboriginal nations, based on language groups.

The relationships between land, animals and people

In most stories of the Dreaming, the Ancestor Spirits came to the earth in human form and as they moved through the land, they created the animals, plants, rocks and other forms of the land that we know today. They also created relationships between groups and individuals to the land, the animals and other people.

Once the ancestor spirits had created the world, they changed into trees, the stars, rocks, watering holes or other objects. These are the sacred places of Aboriginal culture and have special properties. Because the ancestors did not disappear at the end of the Dreaming, but remained in these sacred sites, the Dreaming is never-ending, linking the past and the present, the people and the land.

“Our story is in the land ... it is written in those sacred places ... My children will look after those places, That's the law.” Bill Neidjie, Kakadu elder.

The Creation or Dreaming stories, which describe the travels of the spiritual ancestors, are integral to Aboriginal spirituality. In many areas there are separate spheres of men's and women's stories. Knowledge of the law and of the Dreaming stories is acquired progressively as people proceed through life. Ceremonies, such as initiation ceremonies, are avenues for the passing on of knowledge.

Traditional knowledge, law and religion rely heavily on the Dreaming stories with its rich explanations of land formations, animal behaviour and plant remedies.” (<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/dreaming>)

Starting with a brief page on indigenous spirituality allows me to present an aspect of Australian religious diversity which was not often understood or noted even 60 years ago. We are on Ngunnawal country and I acknowledge the owners and ancestors of the peoples of this land, past and present. The name of this city Canberra is thought to come from the name of one of the family groups (Ngambri) in this area and may mean “meeting place”. When we meet – we join together.

The word ‘religion’ from its Latin roots means: to bind together, to tie together, to link. In Australian society today there is a growing recognition of the need for reconciliation between the indigenous people and those who have come here since colonisation, for many positive reasons but also to acknowledge the wrongs and crimes committed against them. On 13 February 2008 the then Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, moved a motion of *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples* with specific reference to the Stolen Generations (of Indigenous children).

Reconciliation means to bring together, to bind together, to acknowledge one another:
(Kabul) Oodgeroo Noonuccal *Aboriginal Poet (From the Rainbow Serpent).*

Perhaps she will come again when the spirits of men and the spirit of this land are once more - together as one

Oodgeroo herself earnestly wished for reconciliation:

<i>"I could tell you of heartbreak, hatred blind,</i>	<i>When lives of black and white entwine</i>
<i>I could tell you of crimes that shame mankind,</i>	<i>And men in brotherhood combine--</i>
<i>Of brutal wrong and deeds malign,</i>	<i>This I would tell you, son of mine.</i>
<i>Of rape and murder, son of mine;</i>	<i>Son of Mine, 1960</i>
<i>But I'll tell instead of brave and fine</i>	

Australia today is an immigrant society of more than 200 ethnic/cultural and linguistic origins:

- Around 45% of Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas.
- People from over 200 countries make up the Australian community.
- More than 300 languages are spoken in Australian homes.
- Apart from English the most common languages spoken in Australia are Mandarin, Italian, Arabic, Cantonese, Greek, Vietnamese, Tagalog/Filipino, Spanish and Hindi.

More than 60 Indigenous languages are spoken in Australia, in addition to the hundreds of aboriginal language groups. There is an increasing understanding that religion, culture and civilisation are interconnected. This understanding is perhaps due to the influence in the last 60 years of the influx of so many immigrants from very diverse cultures. The prevailing culture in Australia – with the celebration of festivals such as Easter and Christmas – is a Christian one, though not all Australians are necessarily aware of this.

The Table of religious diversity from the Australian Bureau of Census and Statistics indicates that about one hundred years ago, about 96% of Australia identified as Christian, whereas today 61%. Paradoxically, although far more people identify as non-religious and although only about 15-20% are regular attendees at religious services, there is a growing emphasis placed on the role of religion in public life, e.g. in politics or in education. In the Australia I grew up, there was a sharp division between the different Christian denominations of Anglican/Protestant and Catholic. These divisions were notable in schools, in employment and even in political parties.

I have provided some papers attached to my presentation to illustrate the key points. Religious and cultural diversity was even evident from the 18th and 19th centuries. Many migrated here because of the gold

discoveries – including Chinese – and for trade, including the Cameleers from the areas of then India – now Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The development of a multi-faith Australia

For more than 40,000 years prior to European settlement, Indigenous Australians followed belief systems which were embedded in complex oral traditions and based on the forces of nature, ancestral influence and reverence for the land. Integral to Indigenous belief systems were Creation stories, notably Aboriginal stories of the 'Dreamtime', which combined knowledge, customary law and beliefs about the origin of the land and its people. A belief in the interconnectedness of spiritual, human and natural phenomena continues to permeate Indigenous mythology, ceremonial life and artistic traditions. The first known contacts between Indigenous people and outsiders with different belief systems reach back to the sixteenth century, when Muslim fishermen and traders from the east Indonesian archipelago visited mainland Australia.

European settlement in Australia brought with it chaplains of the Church of England (now the Anglican Church). Other Christian churches arrived as transportation and immigration continued so that by the early nineteenth century, the various Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Baptist and Methodist faiths were all present in Australia. Christianity has remained the dominant religious tradition in Australia, with sectarian rivalry - notably between Irish Catholics and English Protestants - being a feature of Australian life until the latter part of the twentieth century.

The first evidence of Buddhist settlement dates to 1848 when Chinese miners arrived in Australia following the discovery of gold. Immigration from South East Asia since the Vietnam War has also increased the numbers of Buddhists in Australia. Jewish people first came to Australia with the First Fleet in 1788 and many more arrived as refugees after World War II. Muslims and Hindus came to Australia throughout the nineteenth century to work on cotton and sugar plantations and as cameleers, divers and sailors. Muslim numbers have increased steadily in more recent times as a result of civil strife in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan and due to immigration, more generally, from Turkey, Egypt and other parts of the Middle East.

Changing religious affiliations

According to the ABS, in 1901, the year of Federation, 40% of the Australian population identified themselves as Anglican, 23% as Catholic and 34% as 'other Christian'. Approximately 1% identified themselves as 'non-Christian'. Similarly, the first census in 1911 showed that 96% of Australians identified themselves as Christian.

After the end of World War II, and with changes to the White Australia policy in that period, there was a flow of migrants from a number of different countries and a considerable diversification of religious affiliation in Australia. Orthodox Christians came from Greece and the Middle East, and Catholics came from Italy, Hungary, Poland and Vietnam. Alongside these churches, Pentecostal, Independent Chinese and other ethnic churches have also emerged. In Melbourne and Sydney today there are churches of every Christian tradition.

Between 2001 and 2011, the number of people reporting a non-Christian faith increased considerably, from around 0.9 million to 1.5 million, accounting for 7.2% of the total population in 2011 (up from 4.9% in 2001). The most common non-Christian religions in 2011 were Buddhism (accounting for 2.5% of the population), Islam (2.2%) and Hinduism (1.3%). Of these, Hinduism had experienced the fastest growth since 2001, increasing by 189% to 275,500, followed by Islam (increased by 69% to 476,300) and Buddhism (increased by 48% to 529,000 people).

The number of people reporting 'No Religion' also increased strongly, from 15% of the population in 2001 to 22% in 2011. This is most evident amongst younger people, with 28% of people aged 15-34 reporting they had no religious affiliation.

Religious Affiliations

Religion	Population ('000)	Population (%)
Christian	13 150.6	61.1
- Catholic	5 439.2	25.3
- Anglican	3 680.0	17.1
- Uniting Church	1 065.8	5.0
- Presbyterian and Reformed	599.5	2.8
- Eastern Orthodox	563.1	2.6
- Baptist	352.5	1.6
- Lutheran	251.9	1.2
- Pentecostal	238.0	1.1
- Other Christian	960.7	4.5
Non-Christian	1 546.3	7.2
- Buddhism	529.0	2.5
- Islam	476.3	2.2
- Hinduism	275.5	1.3
- Judaism	97.3	0.5
- Other non-Christian	168.2	0.8
No Religion	4 796.8	22.3

Source: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features902012-2013>

Over half of the overseas-born population (56%) reported a Christian denomination; the two most commonly reported were Catholicism (24%) and Anglicanism (12%). Non-Christian religions were reported by 19% of the overseas-born population, with Buddhism (6.8%), Islam (5.4%) and Hinduism (4.3%) being the most prevalent. The proportion of the overseas-born population who reported 'No religion' was 20%, slightly lower than the level for the Australian population as a whole (22%).

Recent arrivals were less likely than longer-standing migrants to report an affiliation to Catholicism (18% and 26% respectively) and Anglicanism (7% and 13% respectively). In contrast, a higher proportion of recent arrivals reported Hinduism (10.0% compared to 3.0%), Islam (8.4% compared to 4.7%) and Buddhism (7.7% compared to 6.6%). These differences reflect the larger number of new arrivals from non-European countries. New arrivals were also more likely than longer-standing migrants to report 'No Religion' (24% compared to 19%).

Let me illustrate some aspects of Australian democracy and its multicultural society:

- A few years ago Professor Pat Dodson, was nominated **Australian of the Year** (The father of the reconciliation movement, Aboriginal leader Pat Dodson, has declared that Australia still needs a "treaty" between indigenous people and the government, arguing that acknowledgement in the constitution is the first step.)
- **Young Australian of the Year 2013** Akram Azimi is a dedicated mentor to young Indigenous people. Arriving in Australia 13 years ago from Afghanistan he went from being 'an ostracised refugee kid with no prospects' to becoming his school's head boy. An outstanding student, he topped the tertiary entrance exam scores among his classmates. He's now studying a triple major – law, science and arts – at the University of Western Australia -intent on giving back to his adopted country
- Professor of Moral Philosophy Raimond Gaita was a migrant child raised in a tumultuous family where poverty, mental illness and dislocation all formed part of his environment.
- Nova Maree Peris OAM (born 25 February 1971) is an indigenous Australian athlete and politician. She was the first Aboriginal Australian to win an Olympic gold medal as part of the Australian women's hockey (Hockeyroos) team at the 1996 Olympic Games before switching to athletics and contesting the 1998 Commonwealth Games and 2000 Olympic Games. She was elected to the Australian Senate at the 2013 federal election,

Together with my colleagues here today from the Canberra Interfaith Forum – representing 12 faith groups– I treasure Australian multiculturalism though it has been under some constraints as in general, conservative governments seem to have more problems with this concept even though it is the reality of Australia today. I was born in a refugee camp in Germany and came here in 1951 on a refugee boat and have grown to appreciate this land.

The Benefits of Religion to Society

All Australians are entitled to freedom of speech, association, assembly, religion, and movement (<http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/choose-australia/about-australia/five-freedoms.htm>).

- **Freedom of speech** - Australians are free, within the bounds of the law, to say or write what we think privately or publicly, about the government, or about any topic. We do not censor the media and may criticise the government without fear of arrest. Free speech comes from facts, not rumours, and the intention must be constructive, not to do harm. There are laws to protect a person's good name and integrity against false information. There are laws against saying or writing things to incite hatred against others because of their culture, ethnicity or background. Freedom of speech is not an excuse to harm others.
- **Freedom of association** - We are free to join any organisation or group if it is legal. We can choose to belong to a trade union or to a political party. Having and debating points of view allows for a healthy and strong democracy.
- **Freedom of assembly** - We are free to meet with other people in public or private places. We can meet in small or large groups for legal social or political purposes. Being able to protest and to demonstrate is an accepted form of free expression. Protestors must not be violent or break laws such as assaulting others or trespassing on private or public property. People can change governments in a peaceful way by elections and not by violence.
- **Freedom of religion** - Australia does not have an official or state religion. The law does not enforce any religious doctrine, however, religious practices must conform to the law. We are free to follow any religion we choose. We are also free not to have a religion.
- **Freedom of movement** - We can move freely to and from all states and territories. We can leave and return to Australia at any time. Some migrants may have conditions placed on their visa until they become Australian citizens.

It is worth mentioning here the ancient rule of history: "the conquered conquer the conqueror" especially in societies which are not democracies:

- In Ancient Rome the Christians were persecuted but eventually the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity about 1700 years ago.
- If we look at Egypt in the last 60 years, the group known as the Muslim Brotherhood has been banned for much of that time. In the absence of any democratic parliament as it is understood in the West, that small organization grew and indeed it can be asserted that the places of religion became the unofficial opposition to the ruling Government.

I would suggest that history teaches it is not advisable to ban religions – it leads to the opposite of the desired outcome and to the opposite of Harmony.

Religion

- a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.
- a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects: *the Christian religion; the Buddhist religion.*
- the body of persons adhering to a particular set of beliefs and practices: *a world council of religions.*
- the life or state of a monk, nun, etc.: *to enter religion.*
- the practice of religious beliefs; ritual observance of faith.

Religion is also the study of the “wisdom texts” and indeed these few quotes from the ancient Chinese philosophers express thoughts contained within many if not most religions.

Confucius

- Study the past if you would define the future.
- To be able under all circumstances to practice five things constitutes perfect virtue; these five things are gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness and kindness.
- To see what is right, and not to do it, is want of courage or of principle.
- When we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves.

Lao Tzu

- Knowing others is wisdom, knowing yourself is Enlightenment.

Mencius

- **if one "develops his mind to the utmost" he can "serve Heaven" and "fulfill his destiny;" (7A:1)**
- evil is not inborn but due to man's own failures and his inability to avoid evil external influences; (6A:8)
- serious efforts must be made to recover our original nature; (ibid) and
- the end of learning is none other than to "seek for the lost mind." (6A:11)

The theistic religions are not just about the worship of God but very much about relationships between humans. There are extremists in all religions – but these do not represent or understand the true teachings of the “wisdom texts”.

In many if not most religions it is thought that humans are in the image of God. This is an encouragement for humans to aspire to the highest of moral and ethical ideals to: love your neighbour as yourself; love the stranger; save a life is like saving the world; give to charity; love peace; forgive wrongs; act with compassion; and engage in daily acts of kindness.

These are just some concepts of the benefits. There are many more. Forgiveness breaks the irreversibility of the past. It does not mean to forget the past. It means not to live in the past. This is an answer to the problem of peace. To express love for humanity, justice and the sanctity of life are all prerequisites for peace.

Some scientists claim that all religion is an illusion but as Albert Einstein said: “Reality is an illusion, albeit a very persistent one”.

In Australia, governments are very generous with social welfare services but without the services and emergency help provided by many religious organisations, charities and individuals, many people in need of help, would not receive the help they urgently need.

Indeed, “Volunteering” in many aspects of life – to contribute to society for the common good without monetary reward - is one of the remarkable aspects of Australian society.

It is by emphasising the “values of a common humanity” that we can express our ethical religious identity and affiliation.

It is by being true to our differences that we make our unique contribution to the collective project of human existence on earth.

“Religion also tries to answer the question of what it means to be human? To which the answer is: “to be human is to recognise the humanity of others, of those who are not like me, who do not live as I live - or believe as I believe - but who carry within them the mark of their Creator. Those who are not in my image

are none the less in God's image. That is the vast proposition without which there cannot be a world of justice to the human condition." (Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks).

A recent study from Denmark shows that e.g. Seventh Day Adventists (minority Christian group) have much better health and life expectancy than other groups. Here are some findings from a USA study which may have some correlation within Australia: "America's Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists," by sociologist Rodney Stark.

- religious people are much less likely to commit crimes.
- religious people are the primary source of charitable funds not only for religious causes but for secular philanthropies that benefit all victims of distress and misfortune.
- they are far more likely to volunteer their time for programs that benefit society and to be active in civic matters.
- religion protects against mental illness." For example, persons with strong, conservative religious beliefs are less depressed than those with weak and loose religious beliefs. "They are happier, less neurotic, and far less likely to commit suicide."
- religious people are more likely to marry and to stay married than their irreligious counterparts, and, on the whole, they express greater satisfaction with their marriages and their spouses.
- strongly religious persons seem, all other things being equal, to enjoy reduced risks of heart disease, strokes and high blood pressure or hypertension than those who are less religious, and seem to recover better from coronary artery bypass surgery.
- average life expectancy of religious Americans is more than 7 years longer than that of the irreligious.
- religious students tend to get better grades than do their non-religious counterparts, as well as to score higher on all standardized achievement tests. They are less likely to be expelled or suspended or to drop out of school, and are more likely to do their homework.
- committed religious believers are more likely to read, to patronize the arts and to enjoy classical music than are non-churchgoers.

*Daniel Peterson teaches Arabic studies, edits BYU's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, directs MormonScholarsTestify.org, chairs <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com>, blogs daily at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/danpeterson/> and speaks only for himself."*¹

"Unlike England we have no established church, and indeed section 116 prohibits the government from legislating to do this. At the same time, there is no practical separation of church and state, as we find in the US. This is particularly so in matters educational. We are - or have become - quite unconcerned about public funding of religious schools, provided that, as well as religious doctrine, they teach a more or less secular curriculum. As long as our right to live our lives in our own way is protected, most Australians simply do not worry about the relationship between church and state. This attitude would no doubt horrify British atheist-in-chief Richard Dawkins. But Dawkins might also reflect on the fact that when the state appears to support religion, religion does not necessarily flourish as a result. Britain and the US, which provide little public funding to religious schools, are far more religious societies, at least as measured by belief in a deity, than is Australia. Why this should be so is a fascinating question.

Unlike the US, Australia was not founded by religious dissidents, but by people who had fallen foul of the state for quite different reasons. Ever since, despite the best efforts of the great and the good, we have remained a determinedly irreligious mob.

In the 19th century, communities went to great efforts to build churches. But overall, in its culture and customs, Australia is not a notably religious country. Ordinary people, once they had escaped the power structures of their homeland, seem to have been quite content to settle into a secular lifestyle. Australia has that effect on you, and will continue to do so. We may inadvertently import extremists and we produce a few of our own, but few people take them seriously.

¹ 'Defending the Faith' Daniel Peterson

This is not to say that there is no spirituality in this country. Many of those who have given up on God would say they still believe in something beyond themselves. Many environmentalists have a reverence for the earth that is quasi-religious. Tibetan and other forms of Buddhism attract many converts.

Many people, both Aboriginal and white, care deeply for country. And helping a neighbour is still a real tradition in rural Australia, and in many of our towns and cities, too.”²

Diversity:- The ability to resolve differences in constructive non-violent and peaceful ways is highly valued in Australia. Support for the expression of diversity encourages greater social cohesion and more authentic cooperation in aid of achieving common goals. Cultural and linguistic diversity is gaining increasing acceptance and government policies are moving towards broad social inclusion, acceptance of cultural pluralism and promotion of cultural difference.

There is now broad public recognition of the special place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia’s original inhabitants. While Indigenous Australians still lack both equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, serious attempts are being made to recognise and address their disadvantage. According to the World Values Survey administered by a global network of social scientists, nationalism among Australians has diminished over the past thirty years. Australian society is seen to be enriched by the entry and settlement of ethno-culturally diverse people. Acceptance of other kinds of diversity – such as diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity – is gradually developing.

Wellbeing:- Australians of all backgrounds and beliefs widely support the value of developing Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people. Wellbeing is a broad concept that encompasses quality of life as well as standard of living considerations. Australians also broadly support human rights proclaimed by the Universal Declaration; the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being together with a range of social, economic and cultural rights that ensure well-being and quality of life. These include rights to education, medical care, employment and equal pay, rest and leisure, participation in the cultural life of the community, shared benefit from scientific advancement and social security for people who are unable to earn a living due to circumstances beyond their control, such as unemployment, illness, disability or old age. Australians also support the need for special care and assistance for motherhood and childhood.

Responsibility:- Australians place considerable value on personal and community responsibility. This is interpreted in various ways, such as accountability for individual and collective decisions and actions, obligation to defend the rights of others and contribution to civic and political life through active participation in the community.

Respect and care for the land:- The land has special significance for Australian people. This is most prominently true of Indigenous people because of their spiritual relationship with ‘country’, but it also applies across the Australian population, reflecting the distinctiveness of Australia’s climate, landforms, waterways, soils, plants and wildlife. Australians recognize their individual and collective responsibility for caring for our unique island continent.

Ethical culture:- Australians also recognise the importance of a culture of ethical behaviour founded on integrity, respect and care. Integrity refers to honesty, trustworthiness and consistency between values and actions. Respect refers to mutual esteem among members of a community, regard for lawful and just authority and willingness to consider different points of view seriously. Care refers to empathic feelings and a concern for wellbeing, together with compassionate actions towards people in need.

A declaration of Australian civic values

In 2000, the Australian Citizenship Council recommended, as part of a non-partisan Australian Bicentenary Compact, a declaration of Australian civic values. The Council proposed the following seven civic principles which closely reflect the values discussed above:

1. To respect and care for the land we share;
2. To maintain the rule of law and the ideal of equality under the law of all Australians;
3. To strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy;
4. To uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society;
5. To recognise and celebrate Australia as an inclusive multicultural society;

² Professor of Public Policy Jenny Stewart ADFA (Canberra Times)

6. To continue to develop Australia as a society devoted to the well-being of its people; and
7. To value the unique status of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.”³

My Country by Dorothea Mackellar

“I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror -
The wide brown land for me!”

Sources used were:

- A variety of Australian Government Departments
- www.australiancollaboration.com.au/pdf/FactSheets/Multicultural-Australia-FactSheet.pdf;
- My notes from teaching courses on Australian Studies at University of Sydney and ANU College.

³ The Australian Collaboration A Multicultural Australia

Public Interfaith Symposium - May 2014

Canberra Interfaith Forum successfully organised a Public Interfaith Symposium on Sunday 4 May 2014 on the theme, *'Valuing our Diversity: Not simply tolerating our Differences'*. This interfaith symposium was held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra. Two speakers addressed this symposium: (1) Rt. Reverend Professor Stephen Pickard, Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture; and (2) Associate Professor Mehmet Ozalp, Director of the Centre for Islamic Sciences Studies and Civilisation. Following these keynote addresses, the audience took part in parallel roundtable discussions on the symposium theme. The texts of both speeches are reproduced below together with a summary of key points that arose during the roundtable discussion.



Valuing our Diversity: Not simply tolerating our Differences - by Rt. Reverend Professor Stephen Pickard



A Multi-Faith Celebration

I am delighted to be able to address you today on such an important theme. I will talk about the context for our interfaith work and Professor Mehmet Ozalp will develop the theme further. I want to begin with a brief report on a wonderful occasion held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture on 10th March this year. The occasion was the *Commonwealth Day Multi-Faith Celebration*, an event that has been going for a decade during Professor James Haire's time as Executive Director.

This year we did something slightly different to celebrate the different religious traditions and faith groups in Canberra and who make up the Commonwealth. During the celebration representatives from Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Baha'I traditions came to the rostrum to offer a reflection on a symbol or item that was significant for the identity of that religion. At the same time one or two younger persons (dressed in traditional costumes of their culture) brought forward that symbol and placed it on the table at the front. We also heard messages from the Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the

Prime Minister of Australia as well as a number of vibrant cultural performances of singing and dancing from different religious traditions. At the end of the celebration the front table was bedecked with a remarkable array of symbols and sacred texts. I was struck by the variety of symbols displayed visually before as well as the seriousness and joy with which the symbols were laid on the table and spoken about. The Centre Manager, Margaret Roberts, whispered to me that here is a mini festival of religions.

A Brief Reflection

I thought the story was worth recounting briefly today because it touches directly on the theme for today's symposium: 'valuing our diversity – not simply tolerating our differences'. As I reflect back on that event a number of things strike me as significant for us. First, what we were engaged with (and there were about 200 people present) was attending to one another. The capacity to truly attend to the other is becoming a lost art in a society which is driven by competition, productivity, outputs, success, and profits in an increasingly difficult economic and social environment.

We don't have time nor do we take the time to listen and properly attend to others especially if the other appears odd, unusual or marginal to our everyday world. Attending is a habit of mind and heart and it can change how people live and respond. Second, at the Celebration our attending to the religious traditions of those different from us was not only an exercise in attentiveness; it brought forth a genuine joy in what the other had to offer. It was not a critical self-serving attentiveness – I don't like that, I approve of that – but rather it was a real delight in the emerging diversity of our spiritual traditions. Third it had what I would call a flow back function. It caused me to reflect more humbly I hope on my own religious tradition. It was specific; it did have its own distinctiveness and for that I could be grateful. However I could only appreciate my own tradition from within the whole; from the perspective of the diversity of faiths being celebrated. I could only value my own particular religious tradition as I simultaneously gained a greater appreciation of the diversity of faiths. Fourth, recognizing our diversity sparked my curiosity and imagination with respect to my friends and colleagues from other faiths. Through our diversity I felt drawn further into that diversity in a deeper trust. Finally (for now) this reflection on our celebration reminded me of what might be referred to as the Divine attraction. There is an inbuilt created attraction of all things towards God. Attraction to others 'characterizes the inherent sociality of all creation'.¹ Long before we humans fabricate and construct social processes to generate and shape relations there is a condition of 'towardness', which is 'even more basic than creation and redemption', such that one 'cannot expunge towardness from the condition of things'.² The movement towards others and all things towards God is a fundamental constituent of the created order. It is Divine energy at work at the heart of things.

I felt the celebration that day was eloquent testimony to this remarkable energy for attraction that takes place when we attend to one another, appreciate our diversity, discover a spark of curious imagination and find ourselves drawn to one another through our diversity and difference. The dynamic of valuing our diversity as people belonging to different religious traditions is a valuing that takes us on a journey intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and socially. As I prepared this talk and after I had finished reflecting on the Commonwealth day Multi-Faith celebration I thought that the event itself was more than enough in terms of the theme for this symposium. In one sense I remain so convinced. But the celebration and all that I have derived from it about our diversity and the dynamics of appreciating one another does not occur in a vacuum. We live in Australia and we are members of a global human community. I would like to spend a little time addressing the context for our theme for it only serves to heighten the importance of our interfaith work and witness.

The Broader Context - Multicultural, Multi-Faith Australia

The peoples of Australia are bound together by shared goals and ideals 'in a way that does not require homogeneity-in dress, dietary custom, religious belief, or even outward religious observance'.³ USA, Canada, New Zealand and India are other examples. This is different from European traditions which for

¹ Daniel Hardy et al, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church*, London: SCM, 2010, p. 49.

² Hardy et al, *Wording a Radiance*, p. 47.

³ Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012, p.18.

historical reasons have their identities shaped around particular racial, ethnic and cultural lines.⁴ Moreover the great majority of the peoples of Australia are descendants of immigrants albeit in a land of ancient people who travelled here 40,000 thousand years ago. Because of the particular make up of the peoples of Australia we are a remarkably pluralistic society with regard to race, cultures, languages and religions – particularly from the second half of the 20th century.

Recognizing, acknowledging and appreciating the diversity and fundamental equality of all peoples of Australia is a critical component of our shared goals and ideals. This has made even more urgent and important reconciliation with the first Australians. We often take our shared goals and values for granted; a bit like the air we breath which does not cause us to reflect very hard until an issue – like Asylum Seekers and Refugees – reminds us of who we are, how we are composed and what we ought to do.

In this context religious diversity is part of our contemporary DNA. Valuing our religious diversity is precisely what we ought to do. It is a way of recognizing and acknowledging who we are.

Fear and Anxiety: cultural narcissisms

The cultural and religious diversity of a nation like Australia does not inoculate it from the anxieties and fears of our times. It does not mean that people ‘do not fear the strange and different, or associate religious minorities with danger. It does mean that there is a powerful counterweight’.⁵ The American Philosopher Martha Nussbaum refers to fear as ‘the emotion of narcissism’. She notes that fear is ‘primitive’ being connected to primitive brain processes which humans share with other animals. Of course fear is valuable and often accurate when it comes to survival and/or when life is under threat. But fear’s view of the world is too narrow. Unlike grief or sympathy or compassion fear is an emotion that systematically screens out the full reality and genuine worth of other people. Moreover when fear is socialized observes Nussbaum, it ‘is always relentlessly focused on the self and the safety of the self’.⁶ Fear is fixated on the self and what threatens the self and as a consequence ‘episodic fear and anxiety, or chronic fear, are simply more narcissistic than other emotions It threatens or prevents love’.⁷ Nussbaum concludes: ‘Fear is a “dimming preoccupation”: an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness. However valuable and indeed essential it is in a genuinely dangerous world, it is one of life’s great dangers’.⁸

Nussbaum’s discussion of fear and anxiety is developed in the context of what she terms the ‘new religious intolerance’ – which unfortunately is not difficult to identify and track around the globe. It is associated with what one writer refers to as the ‘securitization’ of religion (terrible word!).⁹ Thus the securitization of religion ‘entails rhetorically constructing religion as a direct security threat to the state and presenting it as an issue of supreme priority that needs to be dealt with outside the normal legal and political processes upon which religion is dealt with’.¹⁰ This may seem a good distance from current Australian experience though we ought not be naive about the fact that there is a powerful secular philosophy that carries strong popular appeal in the West. This approach regards religion as responsible for or at least the underlying reason for much of the violence of the world. And of course this view is regularly given credence through media today. All of this trades on the narcissism of fear and anxiety.

Responding to the Context of Fear and Anxiety

⁴ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.13, notes that ‘Ever since the rise of the modern nation state, European nations have understood the root of nationhood to lie first and foremost in characteristics that are difficult if not impossible for new immigrants to share. Strongly influenced by romanticism, these nations have seen blood, soil, ethnolinguistic peoplehood, and religion as necessary or at least central elements of a national identity. Thus people who have a different geographical origin, or a different holy land, or a different mother tongue, or a different appearance and way of dressing, never quite seem to belong, however long they have resided in a country’.

⁵ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.18.

⁶ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.56.

⁷ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.57.

⁸ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.57.

⁹ Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p.35. This means that ‘an issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure’

¹⁰ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, p.35

How best to address the climate of fear today? Nussbaum reminds readers that within a pluralistic cultural and religious environment shaped by shared goals and ideals there are a number of vital elements that need to be continually remembered, fostered and practised.

- First, good principles which focus on the good of others and the greater common good. Good principles include equality and dignity of all persons, respect for conscience, fairness and accommodation to minorities.
- Second, we need ethical consistency. We are notoriously poor in this area of life personally, socially and politically. Inconsistency, following Socrates, is the sign of an unexamined life. For example when leaders break their promises it is usually a sign that they or their group have not thought carefully enough about what the world would be like if everyone broke their promise.
- Third, to make good principles and stick to them consistently we need to develop our 'inner eyes' which has everything to do with the cultivation of a sympathetic imagination. Thus we need to cultivate 'a spirit of curiosity, openness and sympathy, and a generosity to our neighbours that extends beyond our own self-concern.'¹¹ In this case the majority never say 'I'm the norm, now you fit in'. Rather it says, 'I respect you as an equal, and I know that my own religious pursuits are not the only ones around. Even if I am more numerous and hence more powerful, I will try to make the world comfortable for you'. This is the spirit 'of a gracious hostess'. And the key here is, says Nussbaum, a 'good hostess needs a good imagination'. The empathetic imagination 'moves in a direction opposite to fear....In empathy the mind moves outward, occupying many different positions outside of itself.'¹²

Good principles, ethical consistency and a sympathetic imagination provide the fertile ground for something so fundamental that without it human community disintegrates. I am referring here to friendship - personal, civic and political. This entails curiosity, listening, responsiveness; trying to see the situation from the point of view of my neighbour; striving to go beyond the narcissism of fear and anxiety. Through friendship we are enabled to see the other who is different as a full human being; the other religious tradition as incorporating a long tradition of holiness and moral traditions that have served communities well. The religious traditions of the world have strong undercurrents that generate ideals for a kind of social holiness; not simply preoccupation with the self but the common good for civil society.

Conclusion: a new attentiveness

When it comes to valuing our diversity in religious traditions Nussbaum, as we have seen, offers some helpful guidance. In particular I believe what we need to seek is a renewed spirit of curiosity, a sympathetic imagination and friendship. And this requires a willingness to be vulnerable and attend to the other. Our capacity for properly attending to those of other religious traditions will be directly proportionate to our desire for friendship across difference. Only then can we truly value our diversity.

What we will be surprised to discover is that we find common cause with respect to many of the challenges we face as a society. We will discover that our common desire for the common good binds us together in joint action in the pursuit of a new kind of living, a new social holiness, a fresh prophetic work. I think immediately here of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change. Here the faith traditions join together for the sake of the common good.

I began with a brief reflection on the Commonwealth Day Multi-Faith Celebration. On that occasion the religious faiths attended to each other. But that celebration does not stand alone. It subsists within a civil society that can benefit greatly from the diversity of its religious traditions. Beyond celebration our diversity can be harnessed for the common good and become an important voice which counters fear and anxiety and leads to a peaceful world. This is deeply attractive and it comes from the heart of Divine love.

¹¹ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.96.

¹² Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.146.

Valuing our Diversity: Not simply tolerating our Differences **- by Associate Professor Mehmet Ozalp**



In the last decade, Australia has shifted from multiculturalism to cultural integration and soon after to social inclusion policy. While it is natural for change and development of social theory and policy, relatively quick shifts in policy show that there is a lack of clarity and direction of the social theory in Western countries and Australia. This paper will comparatively examine multiculturalism, social inclusion and Islamic pluralism with three objectives in mind.

First, all three theories will be examined on their characteristics in the unifying agent of society; dynamics of dealing with difference; and criteria for honour/stratification of society. Second, the inclusion of Islamic pluralism will give a contrasting lens to bring out the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary social inclusion and multiculturalism theories. Third, the resulting analysis will provide a framework for a paradigm of cultural ecosystems.

What we are really looking for is a social theory that would hold our societies together, provide equity in society and dignity for individuals. This is at a time when there are multiple identities, layers in socio-economic status and various ethnic, cultural and religious fault-lines. How we keep our societies together is the overarching question. I believe for a social theory to be successful and comprehensive it needs to be inherently constructive and address three fundamental basic human needs.

1. How is the society held together? What is the main gathering agent? Deal with the basic human need to have an identity.
2. How do we deal with difference? Deal with the inherent human need to remove difference (social entropy).
3. How do we dignify, value and honour individuals? Deal with the human need to feel honourable and tendency to feel superior.

Gathering agent for our societies: Identity formation

- That is, how are the members of our society glued together to form a unified whole to create synergy in a unified society. The risk of trying to unify society is that those who are seen to not belong will be excluded and those who do not identify with society will feel as outcasts. Differences are seen counter-intuitive and therefore should be eliminated or minimised.
- Since the French Revolution and the creation of the concept of nation state the gathering agent for our societies has become nationalism. While nationalism helped get rid of the feudal system in Europe and create more politically unified societies, it tended to outcast those who were racially, culturally and religiously different. This has eventually led to the Western colonisation of the world and introduction of policies such as White Australian Policy, interestingly introduced after the federation.
- In post-World War II era, we tried to remedy the limitations of nationalism with multiculturalism, which has served well to tolerate and coexist with those who are different but only temporarily until they have assimilated.
- With multiculturalism nationalism was not totally abandoned. There was still a dominant nation and therefore race, culture and religion which could now tolerate the coexistence of other faiths, ethnicities and cultures.
- In a different way, this is what **social inclusion** also attempts to do. There is a dominant society holding majority economic means and power. There are people who are excluded from the main body who should now be included. This approach somewhat ignores reasons why there is exclusion in the first place.
- Core aspect of both **multiculturalism** and **social inclusion** is that they are primarily driven by economic needs and concerns which is limiting and exclusionist of other issues and needs.

- So the gathering agent in Multiculturalism is nationalism with a celebration of ethnic and cultural diversity whereas for social inclusion it is the act of embracing the peripherals of society in various ways and hope that society will be unified.
- What is needed is a more universal unifying agent that is based on our **humanity rather than anything else**. This has to be done in two ways **simultaneously**.
 - Internalise the paradigm that ultimately the whole humanity is one human race that we come from single human pair. There are both scientific and religious basis for this paradigm. This view makes every one of us related by blood as brothers and sisters in humanity.
 - At the same time, we do need to recognise the racial and ethnic nuances in humanity as diversity that exists on earth as a natural consequence of the growth and spread of human race.
- Human based gathering agent is both realistic and universal at the same time. It helps us see our commonalities at the human level and enable us to have unique identities at the same time. Our identity must first come from our humanity and as a second layer draw from our ethnic belonging.

Dealing with difference: Harmony formation

- Differences emerge as a result of identity formation.
- It would not be enough if we just based our social theory on gathering agent of common humanity while celebrating diversity. Talking about diversity brings out differences. Without a way to deal with difference, highlighting our diversity start to become destructive.
- Most conflicts in the world stems from our inability to deal with difference. This is a human problem.
- In multiculturalism, as experienced in Australia, cultural and ethnic differences are tolerated and respected. While there was some level of curiosity into various cultures existing in Australia, large segments of society were indifferent to cultural and ethnic differences. Ethnic groups also were not prepared to explore the dominant culture. Over time, this has created cultural silos in our society.
- We are yet to see the potential of **social inclusion** in dealing with difference. With its encouragement to **engage** with people of various socio-economic backgrounds it promises more. But one gets the impression that dealing with difference is ignored in social inclusion. Or it is hoped that by giving everyone an opportunity in society people will deal with difference themselves.
- The best way to deal with **difference is to see it as a way to get to know one another**. In doing so one realises that we have less differences than we think. This is done in three ways.
 1. Accept everyone in their own frame of reference. We should not try to change one another to who were.
 2. Engage in dialogue to build cross-cultural relationships. This has to be done especially between people who influence public opinion.
 3. See our differences as unique gifts that everyone and every community offer to humanity.
- So, dealing with difference must not be to eliminate it but to embrace it and see it ultimately as richness that created human civilisation.

Criteria for human superiority and honour: Character formation

- If we just left the basis of our social theory on identity formation and harmony formation, it would not be complete. Disharmony in society is also caused by the human need to feel honourable and superior.
- Western societies in general and Australia in particular give more equality and opportunity than any other cultures in the world at the moment. This is what attracted many people from around the world to migrate to this country. However, this seems under risk at the moment.

- One could argue that multiculturalism fares pretty well in character formation. It allows free expression of individual and communal cultures. People can feel proud and honoured in belonging to a culture and cultural group.
- But this has a counter-intuitive ramification.
 - If one takes honour from his or her cultural belonging, then those who do not belong to this culture cannot share the same honour.
- Social inclusion has some strength in this dimension by emphasising equality but it does not offer anything to fulfil the human need to feel superior and honourable.
- One could argue that, in actuality, by identifying society in terms of those who are in the centre with economic means and therefore influence social affairs of society more than those who have lower economic means and therefore excluded from society, social inclusion accepts society as those who are already economically superior and those who are economically inferior now but we are happy to bring them to our superior status.
- Instead, a **merit based honour and superiority** should be the basis of character formation. This means two things.
 1. One is not superior or honourable on the basis of who they are, their gender, race or colour – things that one has no power to change.
 2. What one does and how our actions contribute to the lives of others is the merit for recognition and honour.
- Therefore, our individual, communal and national character should not be based on self-interest but on our contribution to the lives of other individuals, society and international community respectively.

Conclusion:

We need an all-comprehensive social theory that meets three fundamental and complementary human needs.

1. There is the need to keep our societies unified in the modern world. This is best done by recognising our common humanity and celebrating the nuances of diversity at the same time.
2. There is the need to deal with difference in a productive way. Dealing with difference is best achieved by promoting intercultural dialogue and social engagement with an intention to understand and accept people as they are.
3. There is a need to legitimately recognise those who are better and honour them. But this is best done by focusing on merit, goodness and contribution to humanity.

Therefore, a modern social theory that can work well into the future must have three dimensions and meet three human needs at the same time. First, we must begin with identity formation by recognising our common human heritage, and then affirming the value we add to the world with our unique racial, ethnic or national heritage. Second, identity formation must follow harmony formation in order to deal with differences. This can be achieved by policies and educational programs that engender inter-cultural dialogue, which in turn facilitates human interactions, which then stimulates understanding and acceptance. Third, character formation for individuals, communities and nations need to follow. One's individual, communal and national honour should be drawn from actions that contribute positively to the lives of others.

In our time, humanity is going towards an ecosystem of cultures, faiths and civilisations. We need to build and maintain a positive equilibrium between cultures while at the same time manage the inevitable fault-lines just like in the natural ecosystems.

Summary of Key Points from Roundtable Discussion on the Symposium Theme

Table 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming self-interest and selfishness • Accepting differences and elimination of prejudice by believing in others in trying to walk in their shoes • Valuing diversity and recognition of love leading to harmony • Showing tolerance of other viewpoints in public practice
Table 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming ignorance and also the perception that religions divide the community • Tackling the concept that 'my way is right way' • Meditation within and beyond one's own community • Examining and commenting on government policy
Table 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising our oneness as we come from one creator. • We have to rise above mere toleration to positive acceptance, thus broadening our perspectives of different ways of being Australian. • Education of body, mind and spirit through values and virtues is common to all faith traditions. • In order to value and appreciate religious diversity, we need to learn about other faith traditions, supporting the Australian curriculum from kindergarten to year 12.
Table 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing a willingness to communicate and create an open minded perspective on new things leading to a sharing of ideas and other judgements. • Understanding and developing the truth in what you learn • Nurturing virtue education across the full range of teaching and learning • Promoting service based learning as overcoming fear of argument and learning skills of dialogue.
Table 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding commonalities through learning, interaction and dialogue. • The source and end point of life is similar in different communities, though different faith traditions present different influences. • We need to cultivate the bigger idea of appreciation versus mere tolerance. • We need to appreciate that some are born into a faith tradition, others come to faith at a different time in their life - tolerance should also be extended to those of no faith or questioning faith.
Table 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education from an early age promotes a tolerant society which shows respect for everyone. • There is a need to promote an understanding of spiritual values such as love and kindness, and opposing vices such as hate and vilifications. • Widening the role of education to enhance understanding of different faith traditions. • An example of AVP nonviolence group work originally for recidivists, now being adapted to deal with forms of bullying

Visit to Parliament House

Last year the Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF) arranged representatives from different spiritual faith traditions in Canberra to meet with some parliamentarians of the Parliamentary Group for Interfaith Affairs at Parliament House. This event was hosted jointly by Senator Kate Lundy and Mr Gary Humphries (former Senator for the ACT), who were the Convenors of the Parliamentary Group at that time.



The following is the speech given by Mr Dean Sahu Khan, Chairperson of CIF, at Parliament House gathering, outlining the Canberra Interfaith Forum's positive contribution to promoting community harmony and unity in the Nation's Capital, Canberra.

Dean Sahu Khan's Speech

Honourable Senators, Honourable Members of the House of Representatives, Reverend gentlemen and women, colleagues. As the chairperson of the Canberra Interfaith Forum I would like to thank you on behalf of our Forum for your hospitality and the opportunity to meet and learn. As people of faith we acknowledge and honour the indigenous nations and their elders on whose lands we meet.



All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

—Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Human dignity knows no borders. The desire for freedom, democracy and security is shared by all. Human rights and peace are protected best when people listen and learn from each other in a spirit of cooperation and respect.

The criterion for lot of dissension is sadly and unfortunately religion. That arises mainly out of misconceptions and ignorance of each other's faith. Canberra Interfaith Forum's objectives are to remove all that.

More than 1,000 years ago, a group of Zoroastrian refugees fleeing religious persecution arrived in India from Persia, in what is now the state of Gujarat. The Zoroastrians asked the local king for refuge but he said there was no space for them in his land. One of the Zoroastrians asked the king for a cup of milk filled to the brim. He then gently took a teaspoon of sugar and stirred it into the milk without spilling a drop. He then said to the king, "If you take us into your kingdom, we will be like the sugar in the milk: we will blend in with you but we will also make your kingdom sweeter". The king allowed them to stay and that group of refugees, (and others who followed), flourished to become India's Zoroastrian Parsee community – one of the communities which has contributed greatly to its education, culture and prosperity.

Our diversity has the potential to add sweetness, strength and substance.

2600 years ago, an invaluable advice was once given on how to reconcile religious diversity and the public good. *"Seek the welfare of the city to which you have gone and pray to God on its behalf, for in its peace and prosperity, you will find peace and prosperity. Maintain your identity while contributing to the common good. Be true to your faith while being a blessing to others regardless of their faith."*

That is the challenge today. The good news about religion is that it can create communities based on altruism and trust. It can teach people to make sacrifices for the sake of others. It can build social capital.

A nation should respect its faiths, and faiths should respect the nation. That is the only way we will achieve integrated diversity and the dignity of difference, in which we see our differences as contributions that we bring to the common good.

It is vital that we teach all our children, whether in faith schools or not, to honour this country, respect its traditions, contribute to its welfare and show the same respect to others as we ask others to show to us.

There shall be no peace among nations until there is peace among religions. Interfaith dialogue is an effective means of communication between religions, getting to understand each other, and building of trust and confidence among people of different faiths. Through trust and respect, people will be willing to cooperate sincerely for the service of humankind.

But let us pose a few questions:

What is the opposite of 'bad science'? Is it no science? or good science?

Is the opposite of a bad law, no law at all? Or good law?

Is the opposite of bad education no education? or good education?

Is the opposite of bad religion – no religion? or good religion?

And how are our youth..... our future.....to arrive at and achieve those goals?

The first step is to gain an understanding of one another's wisdom texts – of one another's ancient traditions – indeed of one another !!in this multicultural society, unless our government mandates and fosters a national curriculum for comparative religious studies for all our youth - a combination of an understanding of science, culture, civilization, languages, theology - indeed our world and the other.

In accordance with the Ethics Education initiative of *The Global Network of Religions for Children*, let us create a program that would promote the values of **Respect** (*tolerance is not enough, can a couple who only tolerate each other have a close relationship?*)

Respect for differences and similarities and **Empathy** for injustice. We would deal with conflict in the spirit of **reconciliation** and encourage our youth to take **responsibility** for creating a better, more just and more peaceful future for all of us.

These are the values the Canberra Interfaith Forum is committed to work towards in our national capital.

There are four great institutions of modernity: science, technology, the liberal democratic state and the market economy.

All four are incapable of answering, and indeed in principle do not, and will not answer the fundamental questions, that any self-reflective individual will ask him or herself: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? Those are questions we are bound to ask and there is nothing in the aforementioned Science, Technology, the liberal democratic state and the market economy, that answers those.

Religion remains because Homo Sapiens is a meaning seeking animal. Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts them together to see what they mean. Religion is not our own source of meaning but it is our most rich repository of meaning. What does faith tell me about the other – the one who does not share my culture, my faith, my sense of the other. Is it a problem that different cultures coexist? The multi-linguist does not necessarily have an identity crisis. We are enriched by our religious diversity. Each faith is a candle; none is diminished by the light of others! And together they help banish some of the darkness in the human heart! Let us work together to be a blessing to one another.”

We invite you to call on the Canberra Interfaith Forum to assist in the achievement of these necessary goals.

May God bless us all. May God bless our beautiful nation, Australia.

Thank you.

Committee Members of Canberra Interfaith Forum 2013 -2014

Chair	Dean Sahu Khan
Deputy Chair	Shobha Varkey
Treasurer	Robyn Horton
Coordination Secretary	Willie Senanayake
Communication Secretary	Amaradeep Singh
Minutes Secretary	Faran Sabeti / Clair Hochstetler
Media Secretary	Jayanti Gupta
General Committee Members	Vernon Bailey Gareth Knapman Shephalie Williams Reverend Ivan Roberts
Advisor	Harry Oppermann

Environment Meditation and Healing Garden

This Environment Garden, an initiative of Dr Vernon Bailey OAM, is located on a one-hectare site just east of Clare Holland House in Barton at the eastern extremity of Grevillea Park. The Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF) established the Garden in 2011 after 4 years of effort to:

- Symbolise our commitment to respect, protect and conserve the natural environment;
- Provide a venue where we could meet and meditate on and deepen our connection with the environment;
- Deepen our harmonious relationships and promote healing and reconciliation with each other, including the Indigenous community;
- Strengthen mutual bonds and understanding by working together on garden maintenance;
- Provide a facility where visitors to the ACT Hospice and volunteers working there could rest peacefully in nature.

The present site was selected after close discussions with a group of Ngunnawal elders. Three-metre-high weeds, including blackberries, and exotic grasses covered the whole terrain at that stage. But the site has a powerful mystic presence, bordering serenely as it does, on the northern shore of Lake Burley Griffin. Gradually the wilderness has been tamed and reduced to a pleasant mowable lawn. The Landscape design was done by Damian de Marco and approved by PCS, TAMS and the National Capital Authority.



In March 2011, some 250 small trees and shrubs were planted in a horse-shoe shaped area 120 m long and 6 m wide. The tubestock plants were mainly Grevilleas, Bursarias and Correas, that we estimated would provide good protective habitat for flocks of small birds that were already frequenting the site. They also provide some protection from winds and noise, and colourful displays in spring-summer. The site is also visited by Spur-Winged Plovers and Ducks, as well as the usual Magpies, Ravens, Noisy Miners etc.



In the surrounding grassland, outside the horse-shoe, we have planted some trees native to the area to help the Garden blend with its surroundings. There are 4 different Eucalypts naturally in the area so we planted 12 Eucalypts, 3 of each of these varieties.

The Garden was formally launched by Ms Mary Porter AM MLA, representing the ACT Chief Minister, in May 2011. An attractive Plaque, listing the 12 spiritual traditions of CIF and 8 cooperating organisations, is placed at the upper side of the garden-bed.

CIF has organised several gatherings on the Garden site, on environmental, peace and social justice issues. A workshop was held in April 2013 for over 30 members of youth groups of different faith and multicultural traditions to provide information about the Garden and seek their ideas on uses of the Garden, and explore their motivation for contributing to maintenance. It is planned to organise another activity at the end of November 2014, involving young people from different faith groups, cultural backgrounds and the local Indigenous community to promote friendships and better understand each other's spiritual and cultural traditions.



Several school groups, at various levels of secondary education, have participated in weeding on a one-off basis or are doing so on a regular weekly basis. So we are embarking on a new phase with potentially more youth involvement in several ways.

We hope and expect the site will be used to symbolise and stimulate the awareness and concern of our own faith communities, and of the Canberra Multicultural community in general, for environmental issues and sustainable living, as a contribution to the ACT Government's goals and targets along these lines.

For further information on Environment Garden, please contact:

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