

# **PROGRESSING the MULTIFAITH AGENDA in MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA**

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A Healthy society needs healthy religion. However, in order for health to exist, we need to be in a dialogue with one another, that we may understand what needs to be addressed. At the 2019 FECCA Conference in Hobart, Emeritus Professor Des Cahill, Chair, Religions for Peace Australia addressed the need to consider the white supremacist movement, the case for climate change and religious support, the need for quality religious leadership (particularly for newly arrived religious leaders in Australia) and chaplaincy and spiritual care for a multicultural Australia.



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According to recent figures by the renowned US Pew Research Center, 84 per cent of the world's population think that religion is either important or very important in their lives. Religion addresses the big questions of life: was the universe brought into existence 13.799 billion years ago by a creative, infinite God in creating time and space or has it all happened by chance? What is the purpose of life? Is there life after death? What is the explanation of evil? At the moment in Australia, religion does not have a very positive image, notwithstanding all the religious hospitals, schools, welfare agencies and advocacy organizations. This is because of religiously inspired terrorism and the scandal of child sexual abuse. When the results of the 2016 census were published, Australia's journalists focused correctly on the fact that the nation had become more secular but, in their religious illiteracy, they did not highlight that Australia had also become more multifaith. In 2016, there were 604,240 Muslims (an increase of 200.8% since 1996), 563,674 (+182.1%), 440,300 Hindus (+555.1%) and 91,022 (+14.1%). There were also 125,901 Sikhs.

The relationship between religion and culture is a vexed one, but it is always a reasonably strong one. Two major countries which have attempted to be officially

atheist have failed miserably. Chinese leaders often speak now about importance of Confucianism, and Buddhism and Christianity continue to grow exponentially as illustrated by the recent negotiated agreement between Beijing and the Vatican. Vladimir Putin claims to have had a religious experience in 1993 and he self-presents as a devoted follower of Russian Orthodoxy and is certainly its defender. Whatever form the relationship between religion and culture takes in a particular nation state, and whatever model of the many models of the separation of religion and state a nation state adopts, a healthy society needs healthy religion.

Australia is often described as a secular society – the problem with such a description is that secular has a variety of meanings. Australia is a civil society with a moderate model of the separation of religion and state such as in Canada, and unlike the extreme models in countries such as France and the USA. The right to religious freedom must be framed within the parameters of the governance and management of religion and religious diversity, and it is a vexed issue as to the role of government in the case of bad religion and bad religious practice. The individual has the freedom to be a bigot, but not the right. The focus on the Israel Folau case highlights bad religion because his views, like those of Islamic extremists, are based on literalist interpretations of the sacred scriptures which are comprehensively rejected by all mainstream Biblical and Qu’ranic scholars.



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Keeping positive and healthy relationships between the religions and their various traditions is an important responsibility for both the State and the religions themselves. Religions for Peace, founded in 1970, is the world's most important interfaith organisation with 124 national chapters. It has its headquarters in the UN Plaza because of its close connection with the United Nations. Religions for Peace Australia with its affiliates in every Australian state and the ACT is part of Religions for Peace Asia whose headquarters are in Tokyo and which is currently working in bringing about peace and social cohesion on the Korean peninsula and in Myanmar among other initiatives.

Religions for Peace Australia ([www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au](http://www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au)) has always had a strong relationship with FECCA and the multicultural movement generally. In this short paper, I would like to reflect on four issues which are considered very important for today's contemporary multicultural Australia. They are:~

- (1) The white supremacist movement
- (2) climate change and religious support
- (3) the need for quality religious leadership and
- (4) chaplaincy and spiritual care for a multicultural Australia.

## **(1) The White Supremacist Movement**

Racism has always had a dangerous presence in Australia since 1788, not least since the ending of the White Australia policy from the mid 1950s to the early 1970s. But it has again begun to rear its ugly and poisonous head as was seen in the violent clashes in Bendigo over the building of a mosque which is now going ahead. However, it is very unfortunate that Australia has not had a public conversation about the Australian perpetrator of the Christchurch atrocity, Brenton Tarrant and the toxic discourse of his manifesto, not unlike that of his Norwegian counterpart, Anders Brievik, who now professes to follow Germanic Paganism. Tarrant comes from Grafton, a highly Anglo-Australian city with very little multicultural or multifaith presence, and it was not an accident that Christchurch with its very name was chosen, and its two mosques targeted.

Brievik and Tarrant are heavily influenced by the Great Replacement Theory of Renaud Camus (1914 – ), a French theorist who argues that the white population of Europe is being replaced by Arab and sub-Saharan Muslims from the Middle East and Africa. This process is being facilitated by the 'replacist elites' on both the moderate right and left, and this is why Brievik targeted the socialist camp on the island of Utoya.

It would seem that the multicultural and multifaith movements in tandem with the governments of Australia must be more strenuous and determined in resisting the

white supremacists. Unfortunately at the national level, there is an underpinning national discourse supportive of white supremacy in the debate over asylum seekers. At the moment, Australia does not keep a centralizing national data base of hate incidents. Professor Greg Barton of Deakin University who is very knowledgeable about Islamic terrorism suggests that we are thus ‘flying blind’, and that there is an over-emphasis on Islamic extremism, and not enough on white supremacists.

## **(2) Climate Change and Religious Support**

In the views of most, if not all, faith traditions, the universe is sacred. And religious leaders such as the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, known as the Green Patriarch, have stressed the holiness of Mother Earth, condemning environmental degradation and defining the environment as a spiritual responsibility. As we meet here in Hobart, the Amazonian Synod is being held in Rome where the Pope and his bishops from the 11 Amazon countries are stressing the need to preserve its great rain forests and to treat the indigenous peoples with dignity and respect. In 2015, Pope Francis published his second encyclical, **Laudato Si’** (Praise be to You) which stated that concern for the natural world was no longer optional.

The Australian affiliate of the international organisation, GreenFaith, is the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC) which, in its Living the Change strategy, operates on two deep convictions:

1. “We believe the Earth is a sacred gift” and
2. “We believe each of us has the responsibility to live in a way that supports and sustains our common home”.

It is asking all of us to make a commitment in three areas of behaviours – transport, home energy use and diet. Currently ARRCC is coordinating joint efforts with Religions for Peace, the National Council of Churches, the Faith Communities Council of Victoria and the MultiFaith Association of South Australia. We would like to join with FECCA in advancing the environmental cause.

## **(3) The Need for Quality Religious Leadership**

The interfaith and multicultural agenda by its very nature has a special responsibility in the education of immigrant and refugee religious leaders and recently arrived religious communities. According to empirical social science research, religion at its best contributes to the social and economic capital of a nation. This demands quality and enlightened religious leadership, this requires that, in the religious academies and institutes of religious formation whether Buddhist, Christian or Muslim, enlightened programs about social cohesion,

peacebuilding, human dignity and shared well-being should be part of the curriculum. Part of this is for religious leaders to offer religiously inspired counter narratives against violence and extremism. Another central aspect in teaching and preaching about human dignity are gender equality and the inclusion of women and girls in educational planning.

Genuine leadership relates to the capacity for community building. The challenge of immigrant and refugee religious leaders is to act as catalysts and enablers in their own community development; to open up the processes of communication, face up to issues within their own multicultural communities and to develop a positive vision and the strategies to get there in reaching their spiritual and community goals and their social and economic betterment. A local religious community leader in addition to meeting the spiritual and religious needs of his or her own community needs to pursue the following tasks among many others:

- serve as a multicultural and interfaith model for personal integrity and responsible behaviours
- articulate forward-looking but realistic goals and the accompanying strategies for community cohesion
- work to achieve a high level of wider community acceptance
- engage in strategic planning and action aimed at integrated settlement facilitated by their faith commitment
- identify issues and find practical solutions for social problems
- encourage and facilitate collaboration and cooperation between the various sub-groups within their own religious faith tradition
- display resilience in the face of difficulties and disappointments
- develop leadership potential within their immigrant and refugee communities

An important aspect here is that newly arrived religious leaders whether Buddhist monks, Muslim imams or Anglican or Orthodox priests, whether on permanent or temporary visas, need to undergo an interreligious induction and orientation program soon after arrival because the exercise of quality religious leadership in multifaith Australia needs to be well understood.

#### **(4) Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care for a Multicultural Australia.**

Chaplaincy has been part of Australia's history since European settlement in 1788 with the appointment of Richard Johnson to the so-called First Fleet. It has a much longer history associated with military and prison chaplaincy and with personages such as monarchs, bishops and their chaplains. After this early colonial prison chaplaincy and other forms of spiritual care, chaplaincy in Australia expanded into

military chaplaincy with the formation of the Australian armed forces soon after Federation in 1901 and the formation of army chaplaincy services in 1913.

Chaplaincy rarely hits the news headlines though one exception was at Ground Zero at 9/11 when the Franciscan chaplain to the New York Fire Brigade, Myckal Judge, was the first officially declared victim of 9/11 when he risked his life to enter the burning inferno. He was killed by the falling debris from the collapsing North Tower, reputedly praying aloud, “*God, please end this*”. Victoria Police works with its 100+ chaplains, mainly part-time and since 2005 has had its Victoria Police Multifaith Council and its Multifaith Youth Council which has played an important role in advising police command and at times of great challenge such as terrorist-related incidents.

Academic research has enumerated the desirable personal qualities for a good chaplain as:~

- (1) good listener and good communicator
- (2) interested in the development and encouragement of others
- (3) able to build rapport with a variety of people
- (4) interested in community and organisational development
- (5) having both humility and confidence
- (6) broadminded and flexible in temperament
- (7) gracious, non-judgemental and non-discriminatory while tolerant of others’ circumstances
- (8) able to think and act holistically, creatively, opportunistically and courageously, and,
- (9) able to think and act justly and ethically.

In terms of education and training, the chaplain whether Christian or Hindu ought:~

- (i) to have a good and broad knowledge base in both secular and religious/spiritual matters
- (ii) be qualified at the undergraduate level in both secular and religious/spiritual degrees
- (iii) be qualified at the postgraduate level in either secular or religious/spiritual degrees
- (iv) be trained in Clinical Pastoral Education or an equivalent training program or deep relevant experience and
- (v) be specialist trained for the particular context (welfare, hospitals, prison, universities, schools, military etc.).

Chaplaincy and spiritual care is expanding in Australia. The growth in Australia’s religious communities implies that they are being called upon to provide trained chaplains and spiritual carers to work in a paid or volunteer capacity in the armed

forces (army, air force, navy), in health care (hospital, mental health, aged care), in education (schools, universities, TAFE), criminal justice (police, courts, prisons), emergency services (ambulance, fire, disaster and critical incidents), industrial (airports, seaports, railway stations and factories) and sports settings (Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, Invictus Games, Cricket, Football). Recently, the Victorian Multicultural Commission has asked Religions for Peace Victoria to work with the new and emerging religious communities, such as the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities and with the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches in addressing key issues such as:~

- (i) the recruiting of chaplains and spiritual carers to serve Australia's multicultural communities
- (ii) the pre-service and in service training issues,
- (iii) the setting of appropriate educational and professional entry standards and
- (iv) the accreditation mechanisms for their appointment.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a well-conceived multifaith and interfaith agenda is a central component of multicultural policy and practice due to the connection between religion and culture, and to the fact that healthy religion contributes to social and economic capital, to multicultural social cohesion and to interreligious harmony. Today, to be authentically religious implies being authentically multicultural and interreligious.



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Educated in Australia and Italy,  
Desmond Cahill, Emeritus Professor of Intercultural Studies at RMIT

University, is one of Australia's leading social researchers. In 2006, he was made an honorary fellow of the Australian Council of Educational

Leaders for his work in immigrant, cross-cultural, interfaith and international education. He currently chairs the Religions for Peace (Australia), and represents Australia on the Asian Conference of Religion and Peace (ACRP). He led Melbourne's successful bid to stage the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, the world's largest interfaith gathering, and was its Melbourne Program Director. A member of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) and of the Victoria Police Multifaith Council, he is a Club Melbourne Ambassador as part of the "Think Melbourne, Think Victoria" strategy of the Victorian Government.

He was senior consultant on the Catholic Church to the Royal Commission on Sexual Abuse and Religious Organisations from 2015-2017.



For flourishing among multicultural Australia, a healthy religious leadership is needed