



The Official UN Week

# WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK

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## A PAPER TO THE UN WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY GATHERING

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Like everything else in creation, religion evolves. Within this context we gain knowledge of the Divine by apprehension. We gain Faith by revelation. Nothing is static. Everything evolves. We live in two worlds – the Now and the Not quite yet – the Ideal and the Reality. Sanctity and Icon. The heavenly and the earthly.

The task of my religion, indeed of all religions, is not to make us 'good', for "*none is Good but God alone*", as Jesus told the young lawyer.

What then is the task of religion ? *It is to integrate the darkness of ego – Self – with the light of the Love of God who dwells within.*

King Solomon said that God dwells in unspeakable darkness. Saint John says that God dwells in unapproachable light. The Psalmist says "To him the darkness and the Light are both alike".

I want to thank you for the great privilege of speaking this morning. My own engagement with the Divine continues to evolve as I interrogate the nature of those religions with which, now over many years I have had contact and have lived with - Indigenous Australian Torres Strait, Cape York, Central Queensland and Victoria. For myself there is one fundamental question which I have struggled with for years. The question I ask about Indigenous spirituality is this: **'What was it that sustained a race of a million people for forty thousand years?'**

It is often *so wrongly said* that Indigenous culture had no written language. True they had no alphabet such as we understand that word, but their culture was expressed in easily recognizable icons, images, signs, symbols. As far as I know there was no word for 'religion' in any of their 3000 dialects. Neither was there a word for 'time'. Neither was there any concept of '*nation*'. What sustained them was a web of inter-relatedness. I regret the fact that sometimes in our interfaith dialogue we do not engage Indigenous people. Yet their 'religion', through contact with a wide range of other cultures, evolves. May I illustrate this by reference to Aboriginal 'smoking ceremonies', now a regular rite in Australia. Having lived among aboriginal and Islander people for many years, I never once experienced a 'smoking ceremony'. Is it an intrusion from North America!

However it is now an element in the evolutionary process, and we accept it as an authentic ceremony. Top End indigenous culture has to be influenced by Macassan religions for centuries. Likewise Cape York has been influenced by Melanesia, Polynesia and Indonesia.

What Indigenous spirituality has in common with all other religions is its Liturgy called *corroboree*. It is by means of corroboree that the myth of every tribe is put into touch with its own origins, by story-telling, by singing, by dancing, by prayers and by sacred space. “*Initiation into the sacred ritual and mythology of the tribe provides the authoritative background, a solid footing, and a sure hope for life*” [Aboriginal Men of High Degree’ by A.P. Elkin UQP – p 5 pub 1945]

Whenever I hear of “The traditional ‘owners of the land’ I wish to cry out ‘**NO!**’ for there was never a concept of ‘Land Ownership’ in Australian Indigenous culture. This was a completely different matter in the Torres Strait. And for this reason I consider the Mabo Case **not** to be defective. Indigenous Aboriginal Australians are a different race of people from TSI people. I well remember the day when an Eastern Island woman from Erub, came to see me in my Study on Thursday Island. Her daughter wanted to marry an aboriginal man from the region of Jacky-Jacky on Cape York. She said to me, “Baba (Father) we not want this daughter of we to marry this blackfella!”

The sacred space occupied by Torres Islanders and that of the people of Cape York was entirely different. Islanders owned their land. Aborigines were ‘*owned by the land*’. Aboriginal men, women and children occupied the sacred space of their tribal lands and it was the Land that ‘owned them’. In the end, it was the love of two people that prevailed; and it was within their love that I celebrated the Love of God between them in Holy Marriage.

What do we all have in common?

***The shape of Sacred Space*** - Church, Cathedral, Synagogue, Mosque, Temple. Basically the architectural shape (and here I speak of my own former profession as an architect.)

***Sacred Liturgy- Remembrance*** of origins. Initiation Rites. Prayers. The Pastoral offices of marriage and funeral rites. Every religion has its rituals, ceremonies and iconography. eg In Christianity we have the Liturgy of the Christian Eucharist with its fourfold ministries – *sacred narrative* – the proclamation of the scriptures; *singing* – psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; *dance*; *Prayers* – all celebrated within sacred space- the Church building. And its annual round of Festivals –e.g. Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost... By Liturgy the myth of the Christian tribe is sustained because it puts Christians into touch with their own origins.

Judaism has its fundamental Liturgies; its sacred book wherein sacred narrative sustains belief; its ancient songs - the sacred Psalms, the Festive Occasions and Holy days eg Shabbat with its highly ritualized Evening meal; Yom Kippur, Succoth, Pesach (Passover), the Prayers.

Islam has also its fundamental Liturgies, sacred Book; Prayers with Proclamation and Holy Festivals. Islam has no liturgical worship, no priesthood, even though I often hear referred to Islamic Clergy. No such thing, for all have equal access to God. Yet as I consider it, the use of 'clergy' in Islam is perhaps an indication of evolution. Is the Grand Mufti above all others? Is the chief Rabbi above all others?

So also the worship in the Hindu Temple where all of the senses are employed, most potently the sense of smell in the Incense. The offering of flowers. The ringing of bells, the waving of the sacred flame. The Sacred sound - OM.

**Sacred Scripture.** As I understand the nature of sacred scripture I am led to believe that sacred texts are not an end in themselves. If they are to be of any integrity today they need to be read at four levels of comprehension – literally, morally, allegorically, spiritually. Read only at the literal level they may lead to fundamentalism. Read only morally they have the potential for conflict with the Law of the land.

My understanding of Scripture is that it evolves. For example in the Authorized Version of the Bible, which was translated from many ancient texts, there are some words that in 2013 have a different meaning to those of 1611 AD. E.g. Jesus born in a 'stable because there was no room in the inn'. 1611 – the Greek word **καταλυμα** meant Inn. We now know that that Greek word really means 'Guest chamber'.

Again the 1611 word 'carpenter' has given us an image of benches, saws and planes, whereas the Greek word *'tekton'* means something else. Architect, technician, stone mason.

Scripture evolves, or at least the understanding of scripture evolves to where it is relevant to every age and not to the past, because it is not simply 'literature' but sacred text, unalterable yet open to revelation.

**Sacred Art.** From earliest pre-historic times cave walls were not meant to be art galleries. Rather they are iconostases, the point of transition from the 'Other Place' to the Present. Indigenous Australian art likewise. A man would draw an image of the kangaroo he was about to hunt, thus giving him power over the life of the beast and forgiveness for taking its life. Every known religion has the beauty of its iconography.

In the Hebrew Scriptures (Exodus 20) there is an injunction against the making of 'graven', that is 'three dimensional' images. This prohibition was never ever kept as we know from our interrogation of the sacred texts – e.g. the Cherubim over the Ark of the Covenant; the great bronze sculpture of Solomon's Temple and so on. In Islam there are thousands of stunning representations of people, the built environment, beasts, though the Prophet (may His Name be praised) is invariably shown with his face veiled. Persian miniatures (miniature does not mean 'small,' but 'green' as in background). The most beautiful piece of architecture in the entire world is the so called "Dome of the Rock", with the entire Qu'ran written in mosaic tiles around its entire circumference. However the iconography of Islam has no devotional quality, unlike the iconography of Orthodox

and Oriental Christianity. All images of the Prophet are calculated to surround him with an aura of majestic mystery.

Tibetan Buddhist art is essentially cyclic with its magnificent coloured sand *cosmograms* and Tantric mandalas many of which are potent symbols of the cosmos in simultaneous evolution and disillusion, in tension and repose. I am sure there will be in this audience today some who experienced the magic and the mystery of the building of a sacred cosmogram of the Universe by Tibetan monks at the University of Melbourne some years ago.

**Sacred environment.** The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that in the beginning God created the cosmic and the natural environment. When God's Yahweh ('Adonai' – how, even the name of God in Judaism has evolved – first El Shaddai, then Adonai, then Yahweh - had created our first parents he gave them authority over all the natural environment (Genesis 1 v 28) "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it."

In India, in the Vedic period (circa 3000BC) every aspect of the universe was considered sacred. Father Heaven and his wife Mother Earth. The dawn was Usha and the night was Ratri. Rivers were goddesses and Indra, lord of the rain, king of all gods.

It is in the integration of these opposites people worshipped. Their symbol? Alternating squares of black and White. To the Western mind 'black and white' are the symbols of conflict. Not so in the East, where 'black and white' are the symbol of integration of opposites.

In Indigenous spirituality there is 'The Dreaming'. Everyone has his/her own 'Dreaming'. The icon of each person's Dreaming was his/her *augud* (sacred totem).

A most interesting example of the sacredness of the *augud* may be read into Captain James Cook's encounter with the aborigines of what is now the Endeavour River in north Queensland. During the six weeks of their enforced stay, Botanist Sir Joseph Banks and artist Parkinson acquired some knowledge of the local language. On observing a kangaroo (*macropodus*) which Parkinson drew (now a most famous painting) Banks asked the locals "What is the name of this animal?" to which they replied 'kangaroo'. And so it became known universally as 'kangaroo'. What Banks and Parkinson did not know was that in the language of those indigenous, 'kangaroo' means "We are not going to tell you". The Kangaroo was '*augud*' sacred to the tribe who would never kill it or eat it!

[When I was consecrated bishop the Indigenous people with whom I had lived gave me my '*augud*' – the Platypus. The creature of two worlds – air and water-conscious and unconscious. There was no such thing as 'Dreamtime' for all is held in anamnesis – the past, the present and the future are One. The entire land was sacred, even though certain places were and are held to be of particular significance and pre-invasion culture was based on the regular conservation, preservation of the land.]

Every Religion has its Sacred sites – Mecca, Jerusalem, The Ganges, The Potala .

I remember in February 1983 I had a conversation with French writer and photographer M. Phillipe Blanc and Mr Gabriel Lafitte director of the Tibetan Information Service. In a subsequent Press interview I told the newspaper "there is a real link between Christianity and Tibetan Buddhist spirituality through the writings of Carl Jung. These things took place after the first visit of the Dalai Lama during the winter of 1982.

Traditional Tibetan art is essentially religious with love of nature and the natural environment linked to love of others who are also called to care for the land.

Islam has a profound relationship with the environment where the heart of reason is enshrined in the walled Garden – Paradise. “In Islam the inseparable bond between Man and nature, and also between the sciences of nature and religion is found in the Qu’ran itself; the divine book, which is the logos and word of God. As such it is both source and the Universe” to quote Seyyed Hossein Nasr whose writings would be known by many here this morning. [‘Parabola Spring 1999 pp40ff]

Paradise is a Garden. This idea predates Islam and is found in the Hebrew Book of Genesis. In fact mention of paradise as a Garden goes back to the Sumerian period (4000 BC) the ‘Divine garden is also mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh “In this immortal Garden there stands a Tree..... The word ‘Paradise’ comes from- the Farsi (Persian) *pairidaezi* – *pari* = *around*; *daeza* = *a wall*.

Today we have gathered in the context of interfaith dialogue. I have presented some of the points of common interest that we hold. However we not only celebrate the things we hold in common, we **are here to celebrate our differences.**

Above all else what we hold in common is God’s love for us, our love of God and our love of one another. The love of God and the profound expression of it. It is for this reason that the God of the Christians exists in the Unity of Hospitality – One in Three, Three in one. For us it is only in the complexity of plurality the Uniqueness of Oneness can be expressed. We do not worship three gods! Consider what this means in terms of music. When Arnold Schoenberg struggled with his great Opera *Moses and Aaron* in May 1932 for six months, he finally arrived at the sound of the God of Moses speaking from the burning bush, by employing six singers to proclaim the Voice of God – soprano, tenor, baritone, coloratura, contralto, basso profundo. Only in the complexity of plurality could he express the uniqueness of Oneness! This, as I understand it, as an artist, is true of all disciplines.

We do not all hold to the same concept of sacred space. For example, whereas in Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Indigenous religions there is a focus, the Mosque has no liturgical focus, the mirhab simply points to the direction of Mecca.

Neither do we all hold to a common Universal concept of Liturgy, nor of Sacred Scripture.

I believe we live in parallel Universes – the one which we can see, with its billions of galaxies (By the way, if we need any evidence of the evolution of science remember Galileo!) If we need any evidence of the evolution of literature remember Assyrian cuneiform; if we need any evidence of the evolution of speech consider what Edison would have thought of the iPod! Or of religion when Abraham stretched forth his hand to slay his son, his firstborn, the one he loved Isaac or Ishmael ? In the evolution of religion God’s intervention put an end to human sacrifice.

In past times humans expressed their love of God, of God's love for Man in many different ways. Humans have expressed their love of one another in many and various ways, yet the spiral of violence continues throughout the world under the guise of religion. This will only cease when all of us acknowledge that the world's religions are in fact a beautiful rainbow. The rainbow is comprised of seven colours and even though each merges into the other, the integrity of the whole depends upon the unalterability of each colour. Creation is, to quote the late Archbishop David Penman, "*A Garden of Many Colours*".

We all share common ancestries; we have been moulded by the Love of God and despite our many differences we are all children of the One God who has made us in His own Image and His own Likeness. Image is one thing; 'likeness is another. What binds image and likeness is 'Hospitality' the Love of God and love of one another. 'Hospitality' is another Name for God who offers all to all.

We need to remind ourselves that such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, psychology, sociology are recent inventions/ discoveries/ revelations. Each has evolved. And religion, which enables us to apprehend these disciplines, I contend, likewise has evolved.

I began by saying that we gain knowledge of God by apprehension; that is, by the use of our five senses; but we come by Faith through revelation as we pray, as we worship, as we care for the widow, the stranger, the needy, the homeless, the refugee and asylum seeker, for we cannot love God whom we cannot see, unless we love our neighbour as/and ourself.

The English language, as C.S. Lewis reminds us in his book *The Four Loves* has only one word for LOVE. The Greek language has four words – *philos, eros, caritas and agape*. It is in this context that love of God and love of neighbour must be expressed.

May I end this overview with this thought:

I love you, I will your best good; whatever religion or no religion you possess, because I am first a human being, a Child of God, second, a Believer in a supreme Divinity, then a Christian, then a Bishop of the Church. And I have and still love companions of every faith I have come to know. Why ? Because in the last day, as we stand before the Judgment seat of God He will say to us, "My Judgment is always Good News. Enter into the joy of the Lord".