BEING RELIGIOUS AND INTERRELIGIOUS IN REGIONAL AND RURAL VICTORIA: THE ROLE OF ITS INTERFAITH NETWORKS

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Occasional Address given in Shepparton on 22nd September, 2012 at the Turkish Mosque

Religious Extremism and Religiously Inspired Violence

Last Sunday morning, I was staying in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur when I heard on the BBC news of the violent Sydney demonstrations triggered by the anti-Muslim film. I had just left Indonesia after speaking at a symposium sponsored by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs on the role of religious education in creating a religiously pluralist society and countering Islamic radicalism. Our issues here in Australia are challenging but they are not nearly as serious as they are in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, where the religious moderates are working hard to counter the extremism of the radicals though one key problem is that the current Indonesian political leadership is not speaking out against the attacks on Muslim breakaway groups like Ahmadhiya and on Christian communities with the burning of churches.

In this unpredictable and less controllable world (Beck 1999), overseas and internal extremism has the potential to destroy the fabric of any civil, pluralist and democratic society. My message to the Indonesians, as is my message today, was, To be authentically religious in today's contemporary world means to be interreligious. This is the interfaith message. And I want to congratulate all of you from across regional Victoria for all your interfaith work, from Shepparton to Bendigo to Ballarat to Geelong. I hope that from this address you will realize how important your work is in fostering harmony and cohesion in a religiously pluralist society.

Across the world, we keep receiving conflicting messages. In our complex global village where religion is still very much at world centre stage, the global eye fixates upon particular events. In the recent Olympic Games held in London in July 2012, the most memorable moment for me was, as the very final act of the athletics events in the Olympic stadium, the presentation of his second gold medal to the United Kingdom representative, the African Mohammed Farah. He was born in Mogadishu in 1983, grew up in Djibouti before migrating with his family as an eight-year child. At the moment, he is the world's best long distance runner, having won the 5,000 and 10,000 metre races in London to the joy of the British public. The whole stadium in unison stood up to sing the national anthem, "God Save the Queen" as they saluted their refugee champion.

This very positive moment was countermanded by another happening across the North Sea. At the very same time, over in Oslo, the lone-wolf warrior, Anton Breivik was languishing in jail, convicted but awaiting his sentence. His case gives us much to reflect upon. Described quickly and incorrectly as a Christian fundamentalist after Muslim extremists had initially been wrongly blamed, he does not fit the accepted description. He was raised in an upper middle class home, the son of a nurse and a Norwegian diplomat who deserted the family when Anton was one. He seems to have been raised in a religiously vacuous house before having himself baptised into the Lutheran Church at the age of 15.

Breivik viciously hated all Muslims and the Islamic religion. And in his 1500-page warrior manifesto, he expresses his hope to rescue Europe from feminism, multicultural pluralism and the Muslim religion. . But he equally hated the political left, the young left, whom he slaughtered in great numbers on the Norwegian island of Utoya. Breivik's massacring of innocent, idealistic young people has raised the issue of websites pouring out vicious e-blasts of hatred and religiously-inspired violence. We need to recognize that his ideas were the vicious spawn of a rhetoric that flows freely in cyberspace that becomes a net of hatred (Hylland Erikson 2011).

The Breivik tragedy gives us cause to reflect on the power not just of ideas, but of dangerous ideas, and the potential of the internet and the other new technologies to generate conflict and horrendous acts of violence.. Since 9/11 and its aftermath, including the Bali bombings, it was inevitable that focus switched to social cohesion in religiously and culturally pluralist countries, including upon combating homegrown terrorism. Religious and ethnic extremism has rightly come under the spotlight at a time when we have entered a religiously more competitive, if not conflicted, world. At the same time, religious leaders have come under greater scrutiny and accountability in how they respond to religious diversity.

The Religious Profile of Regional and Rural Victoria

Since the release of the 2011 census figures on 21st June, 2012, the daily newspapers, those bastions of Australian secularism, have been telling us, if not shouting it, that Australia is becoming more secularized with the large rise in the "no religion" category. And this is truer of regional than urban Australia. But the journalists' story is in fact only half the story. It is true that the "no religion" category which now includes many of our Chinese Australian citizens who have emigrated from a communist, officially atheist country, has risen. But it is also true that the "not stated" category has fallen.

And this pattern is countered by the rise in the non-Christian groups and the evolution to a greater multifaith Australia. Paradoxically, Australia becoming more religious but religious in a different way. Hence, in Australia, we are seeing a greater polarization between non-religionists, which includes very vocal anti-religionists who think religion should be banished to the private forum of the home, and the religionists.

We are seeing a decline in the number of European immigrants, whether economic or refugee, as the European immigrants and refugees of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s pass on. But gradually they are being replaced by a slow but steady growth of skilled migrants from English-speaking countries and by refugees and other immigrants from Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The numbers of those affiliated with religious traditions other than Christian have risen disproportionately so that now one in fourteen Australians belongs to such traditions. In the period 2006 – 2011, the Hindu population almost doubled and the Sikh population almost tripled.

Now in regional Victoria, there are more Buddhists than Salvation Army members, more Muslims than members of the Churches of Christ. And the Hindus are not too far behind as the Indian migration to Australia continues to be ramped up, as well as the continued inflow of Filipinos, including to rural areas.

The mainstream Protestant churches continue to decline but not as rapidly as we had anticipated because of the increased migration from the English-speaking countries such as the U.K., Ireland, the U.S.A. and especially New Zealand and South Africa. Contrary to expectation, the Catholic population has risen because of three factors: (1) the Catholic component of the migration from the

English-speaking countries (2) the migration of the Asian Catholic minorities from countries such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka and (3) the migration of the Eastern-rite Catholics led by, in recent times, the Chaldean Catholics from Iraq and the Syro-Malabar Catholics from Kerala in India though this third factor is not impacting upon regional Australia. For all Christian communities in regional Australia, their resources are being stretched with a lessening in the number of Sunday services. The numbers of persons of other faiths other than Christian in regional, rural and remote Australia is still smallish but they are growing

Hence the question becomes: as a regional and rural multifaith Victoria continues to emerge and grow, what is the role of multifaith networks?

In answering this question, I want to frame my initial response around three points before outlining some challenges. The first is to highlight the importance of religion for the individual and for the community and the role of local community leadership. Many educated secularists are too easily seduced by the easy and generally false argument that religions directly cause division and conflict whereas the reality is usually much more complex as we saw in Northern Ireland. Manfred Steger (2008) has shown how secularism as a very and perhaps peculiar Western phenomenon, far from being objective truth, is but a series of assumptions and truth claims.

In her outstanding recent monograph, Erin Wilson (2012) shows how the secularist bias has generally constrained public and political discourse within the West. And it is constraining the West's capacity to dialogue with the African, Asian and Islamic worlds which are all very religious. She cogently argues that the many studies of religion and politics in the West have displayed an overwhelming lack of critical self-reflection. Social science analyses have been plagued by narrow and limited understandings of religion based on the dualist thinking of secularists who focus overheavily on the institutional, individual and irrationalist dimensions whilst neglecting the ideas and the communal and rational elements inherent in religion. This has been one reason why secular liberals have had difficulty accepting the generally positive effect religion has had on individual well-being and on the social capital or social wealth of a nation.

The second point is to highlight the interfaith aspect. In today's world, to be religious is to be interreligious. If someone says that they are deeply religious and then refuse to dialogue and interact with people of other faiths or visit their places of worship and not to attend their functions on the grounds that "other religions are the work of Satan" or "down with the infidel", then that person is not authentically religious. They act in contradiction to the deepest values of their own faith tradition, whether Buddhist or Christian or Hindu or Muslim or Sikh..

Thirdly, regional Victoria has a long history of receiving and welcoming immigrants and refugees, stretching back to the Gold Rush of the 1850s. Up until the 1920s, the most multicultural city in Victoria was Ballarat, and Bendigo was not too far behind. Yet, in another irony of history, in contrast to Shepparton, Mildura and the LaTrobe Valley, these two major Victorian cities were not nearly as affected by the post-WWII migration movement.

The emergence of the interfaith networks across regional Victoria has been a further chapter in this history and it presents the networks with some interesting challenges.

The Challenges for Interfaith Networks in Regional Victoria

The first challenge is to welcome, and to continue welcoming the stranger into our midst. This is the tradition of hospitality of all the major religious traditions. It is also the tradition of the bush.

Hospitality is making space for the other, the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee; it is offering them the space to be themselves and creating space where change can take place.

The second challenge is to build and continue to build the social wealth of the local community to ensure social cohesion nationally and locally. The social cohesion and religious extremism debate has focussed in the last 6 – 7 years very much on homegrown terrorism but the issue is much broader than this. There is no agreed definition of social cohesion but generally descriptions revolve around a shared vision held by a well-functioning core group or community that acts in a continuous and interminable process of achieving social harmony. The research evidence suggests there are five key elements:

(1) creating a **sense of belonging to a multifaith nation and to a multifaith community,** proud of itself and incorporating shared values, trust and a sense of psychological identification. A local community's first task at all levels is to create continuously a sense of belonging, including to the local area as well as to the nation.

(2) ensuring **social justice and equity** in accord with human rights observance and in terms of access to government services and funding. This second element is to ensure, firstly, that all citizens and residents, both permanent and temporary, are treated justly, with equity and equitably, including that the youth and the adult young receive their fair share of the local resources and are provided with multiple opportunities to develop themselves and their talents through training and education. Almost all suicide bombers have been young adults.

(3) encouraging **democratic participation** with regard to political and cooperative involvement. This third task is to ensure participation by all groups in civic and social life as part of creating this sense of belonging. Elected civic and administrative leaders as well as members of parliament need to attend the many varied ethnic and religious community functions as part of creating the sense of welcoming and participation that lie at the heart of social cohesion.

(4) bringing about **acceptance** of ethnic, indigenous, religious and sexual minorities and working against racism, discrimination and extremist ideologies based on literalist interpretations of sacred religious texts or ethnonationalist ideologies. Welcoming includes resisting racism, bigotry and discrimination through formal media and community education programs.

(5) forging a **sense of worth for all** incorporating people's general happiness, life satisfaction and future expectations. People must all have a sense of their personal worth as individuals, generally happy in their personhood, generally satisfied with their lives and living and working with achievable and realistic expectations.

With five such elements, we can inoculate societies from being impacted by overseas events and dangerous imported ideologies and from the incubation of homegrown terrorism.

The third challenge is to engage with the local schools and the local university campuses, especially through their chaplains, all of whom ought to be pastoring to the students in an interfaith way whilst remaining true to their own faith tradition. Fourthly, I would like to see each interfaith group develop a Code of Conduct and a Common Statement of the Local Faith Communities – this is a very worthwhile initiative to bring groups together to discuss substantive moral and interreligious issues.

The fifth challenge that I see is to engage and continuing to engage with the police. Victoria Police have been world leaders in interacting with the multifaith communities through their policy of

community policing which is built around the notions of intelligent policing, confident policing, and partnership policing. Partnering the policing in the integration of immigrant and refugee communities is an important element of any settlement strategy. And lastly, it is incumbent for local interfaith groups to help extend the network through initiating new local interfaith groups in other regional areas.

Activities for Local Interfaith Groups

There are many activities that local groups can do. I would like to quickly mention sixteen.

1. Interfaith Theological, Meditation and Community Dialogues Sessions

2. Formation of Interfaith Women's Groups

3. Formation of an Interfaith Youth Group

4. Multifaith Blessing Ceremonies at Official Openings or in Times of Tragedy

5. Rostered Prayers for Council Meetings

6. Multifaith Walks for Peace or Justice or whatever

7. Multifaith Poetry Sessions

8. Prayer Services for Peace

9. Multifaith/Multicultural Bus or Car Tours

10. Video/CD Productions

11. Open Days of Places of Worship

12. Multifaith Artistic Projects

13. Multifaith Concerts

14. Multifaith Sacred Spaces

15. Information Kits for Local Distribution

16. Social Justice Breakfast Meetings

17. GreenFaith Events

Australia has an enormous capacity for a systematic and well-ordered immigrant and refugee settlement managed locally and nationally. Australia now is admired by the rest of the world. Emigration to Australia, because of the distance involved, has generally been the result of a careful decision with appropriate preparation even if the immigrant knew, as is often the case, very little about Australia. Every migration is a risk, individually and collectively, and the settlement of immigrants and refugees in regional areas contains higher levels of risk. In all immigrant and refugee groups, there is always a small group (0 – 6%) for whom the decision to emigrate ends in disappointment, if not disaster. Expectations may not have been met. The support may not have been enough. Opportunities may not have been available. The spectre of the defeated immigrant haunts all migration movements. They may not have had the psychological resources or the key adaptability

attributes to cope such as personal autonomy, observational acuity, flexibility and emotional resilience to cope. The risk is of extreme loneliness, extreme marginalization and loss of control over their own lives as well as the mental health consequences of trauma. And the full consequences of any migration movement can never be fully foreseen no matter how well engineered by governments.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with three final points:

Firstly, regional Australia is being asked to welcome, accept and integrate skilled migrants, refugees and family members. If this is a major challenge, it is also a major danger. The danger is the creation of a rural refugee underclass, perhaps black, perhaps Muslim. It would be a worry if these refugees were to be a high source of unemployment or if they were employed only in unskilled, dirty work positions. This is why serious government resourcing together with strong business and entrepreneurship support together with community support is needed.

Secondly, we should not underestimate the resilience of refugees nor the creativity of all types of migrants in creating or finding business opportunities. They come as catalysts for change in which the global is being make local. The spirit should be one of genuine dialogue in the building of trust.

Lastly, despite the Sydney of last weekend, despite Cronulla, Australia is a wonderful healing place for ancient and less ancient hatreds. Religious leaders have played a key role in the defusing of these animosities. And that is why we are admired around the world. The Turks and the Greeks have lived in relative harmony for the past forty years as have the Serbians and Croatians even though there have been incidents along the way as at the soccer and the Australian Open. These are passing events as was Cronulla as will be the Sydney protest last weekend.

For the skilled migrant as well as the refugee settling in regional, rural and remote Australia, will their hopes be fulfilled or their dreams be shattered? It depends on them but it depends more on us as we broaden and deepen the great vision of a multicultural Australia. The managing and regulating of ethnic and religious diversity has taken on a new urgency. It has always been a process and it will continue to be a process.

In today's unpredictable world, to be religious implies to be interreligious. Let us be reminded of the national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam, who was a unique figure to have opposed bigotry in relation to religion and gender, with his proclamatory call, "Come, Hindu! Come, Musulman! Come Buddhist! Come, Christian! Let us transcend all barriers, let us forsake forever all smallness, all selfishness and let us call brothers and sisters as brothers and sisters. We shall quarrel no more".

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Bio-data: *Desmond Cahill, Professor of Intercultural Studies at RMIT University in Melbourne, has been teaching about cross-cultural issues and multicultural societies for the past 35 years to students in the areas of criminal justice, education, international, tourism and youth work studies. Since 9/11 his focus has been on religion, globalization and interfaith issues. At his university, he established the B.A. (Multicultural Studies) in 1986 and its successor course, B.A. (International Studies) in 1999 to*

deal with global, multicultural and interreligious realities. Currently, he is supervising international Ph.D. students with Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian and Vietnamese backgrounds.

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