



## Religion: Barrier or Bridge to Building Understanding

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Outlining his case for Australian participation in war against Iraq, Prime Minister John Howard made two observations to the National Press Club about Islam on 13 March 2003:

Terrorism existed long before 1991, but not the random mass casualty kind borne of radical Islam and exemplified by the acts of the 11 September 2001 and the 12 October 2002.

The decade of the 1990s was meant to have been one in which the new international order, free of the tensions of a bi-polar world, was to have been established. Rather it became a period which saw the emergence of international terrorism as a major threat to international security - terrorism with not just an anti-western bias, but also directed at destabilising moderate or vulnerable governments in the developing world.

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International terrorism is borderless. A key motivation is detestation of western values. Its prime, but by no means only, target is that of the United States, its interests and its citizens anywhere in the world.

It has obscenely hidden behind Islam - one of the great religions of the world. It will falsely depict retaliation against terrorism as some kind of generic attack on Islam. Australia's own approach to Iraq is not anti-Islam, a fact accepted by the President of Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic nation.

Only 1.5% of the Australian population (281,572 persons in the 2001 census - but a sharp increase from 200,805 in the 1996 census) is Muslim. 36.5% of Australia's Muslims (102,566) are Australian born. Those born overseas come mainly from Lebanon (29, 321) and Turkey (23,479). 70% of Australians describe themselves as Christian. It has become very easy to make the simplistic public assumption that Christianity is identified with western values and public goods such as democracy and individual human rights. Islam then becomes the foil or the cover for anti-

western sentiment. Professor Abdullah Saeed, head of the Arabic and Islamic Studies Program at the university of Melbourne, makes the point that "Muslims in Australia do not form a single homogenous community" and that "their attitudes, behaviours, ideas, values and perspectives reflect the sorts of cultures from which they originally came." He observes:<sup>1</sup>

In Australia, there is no inherent contradiction between being Christian and Australian, or being Jewish and Australian. Likewise, there is no contradiction between being Muslim and Australian.

However Saeed does concede that there are some Traditionalist and neo-revivalist Muslims in Australia who are "likely to be hostile to the West and Western values, and by extension to fundamental Australian values."<sup>2</sup> Intellectual and power elites in Australia are likely to regard religion as a non-rational component in any political calculus. They are likely to pride themselves in being free of religious prejudice or predisposition while suspecting that their counterparts in countries such as Indonesia are religious and thus less likely to make a dispassionate political or economic analysis of the situation. In Australia, the presumption is that one's religious beliefs, practices and values are private matters which may provide the motivation for public action but that such action can be justified or explained only by public reason which excludes consideration of religious convictions.

Australian author and ex-prime ministerial speech writer Bob Ellis gave vent to the populist Australian fear that was latent even before the events of September 11, 2001 and October 12, 2002 when he wrote in the *Courier Mail* on 1 January 2000:

Will the Muslim nations be the big warmakers then, because virtuous death in battle is part of their religion? Maybe. Yet Pakistan, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Jordan have shown less taste for holy crusades than Israel on average, and Indonesia's army prefers to slaughter its own civilians than take on another army, and a few thousand well trained Australian regulars can spook them into evacuation. So the Muslim bogeyman may be a paper tiger, too, like Russia and America.

In the public sphere, our greatest religious challenge is the relationship between Christianity and Islam. In the personal domain, the challenge is having the faith that religious experience can fire the imagination and sustain hope in the face of suffering and death. The increasing number of self-reliant non-believers will probably become more convinced that God is simply a figment of the human imagination. For them God will remain the word for the Other created in man's image and likeness or the fictional Other who is all that man cannot be.

I recall contemplating religion's future on the eve of the new millennium. I visited the local mosque in my area for a discussion with the imam. It being the lead up to Christmas, I was engaged in the usual round of Christmas drinks and Christmas parties. It being Ramadan, he and his congregation were fasting by day

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<sup>1</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Islam in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2003, pp. 206-7

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 205

and gathering for prayer at sunset. He invited me to join them for food and prayer. There were two visiting imams from Palestine and Egypt, both of whom knew the Koran off by heart. Their learning and wisdom were greatly prized. There is no Christian who claims to know the New Testament by heart. I remembered the Australian writer Helen Garner's account of introducing fellow novelist Tim Winton to "a recently 'saved' Christian". The conversation ended when Winton said to him, "Why don't you give the book a rest? Why don't you let your life be your witness?"

As dusk fell at the mosque, we shared the familiar things including food, drink, hospitality and a reverence for God. We agreed that our permanent differences demand respect and tolerance. Fortunately, the imam's children now experience greater acceptance in the Australian school playground but they still find the media uncomprehending of their world view. Returning home, I talked with an Eritrean Catholic priest who says whenever Christians and Muslims are found in equal numbers, there is trouble because people who are not truly Christian nor Muslim are able to exploit religious and tribal differences. While religious differences can highlight other differences, a common religion does not overcome other differences. The terror of Rwandan Catholics slaughtering each other in church is not an ancient memory.

For some worshippers, religion will remain only an ideology - a prop to satisfy their ignorance or to allay their fears, a device to retain social cohesion and moral standards. But with alternative props and devices, and in the face of decreasing social expectations and support for religion, these worshippers will find other shrines. In only one life time, we Australians have moved our architectural focus from cathedrals to art centres to casinos. In a pluralistic, democratic, secular, globalised environment, worshippers will need to be more convinced of the truth of their beliefs and the reality of their religious experience.

We Australians have entered an era of such secularism that non-religious persons can confidently and publicly state not just that they do not believe but that religious experience is false. Kerry Packer is one Australian with much experience of life, including coming close to death. On his return, he said, "I've been to the other side and let me tell you, son, there's....nothing there." Christians hearing Mr Packer recall Paul's observation to the Corinthians, "If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all people are most to be pitied."

With a clearer distinction between church and state, public and private, there will still be sacred space for the religious person to enjoy community and all things necessary for living a religious life in the world, whatever views of those like Citizen Packer. In Australia, even amongst the intellectual and power elites, there is an increasing respect for the religious beliefs of indigenous peoples. Even the most non-religious political ideologues need to be respectful of the major world religions if only to avoid the charges of racism and paternalism. After all, if all religious experience is presumed to be false, why would you bother accommodating Aboriginal spiritual relationships with land, especially when national economic

development is at stake? Why accord respect only to those religions confined to a particular culture?

Australians generally are growing more weary of the statements by religious authorities. A few months prior to his death, internationally renowned Australian novelist Morris West said, "The pronouncements of religious leaders will carry more weight, will be seen as more relevant if they are delivered in the visible context of a truly pastoral function, which is the mediation of the mystery of creation; the paradox of the silent Godhead and suffering humanity." At all times in the public domain, whether in dialogue with government about social policy or in giving a public account of church policy, religious leaders need to speak with the voice of public reason. Therein lies the tension. Without trust between those whose consciences and world views differ, we will not scale the heights of the silence of the Godhead nor plumb the depths of the suffering of humanity. This mystery is to be embraced in the inner sanctuary of conscience where God's voice echoes within, to be enfleshed in the relationships we share, and to be proclaimed in our calls for justice in the public domain, at home and abroad. Australians know they are abundantly blessed with the opportunity to contribute to a more just world - at home and abroad.

Australian public figures like the feminist and activist, Anne Summers, who have had a religious upbringing, rejected the lot, and then reflected on the experience offer us key insights into the future of religion. In her autobiography *Ducks on the Pond*, which commences with an abusive father and ends abruptly in 1976 with the death of her youngest brother, Summers recalls the Catholic funeral and the wake: "It was impossible to accept that people might love me for myself, without a motive involving exploitation or gain. That...was the real damage my father had done. His rejection had made me suspicious of love. I was wary of entering those chambers of the heart where trust could not be bartered, and where acceptance of affection meant surrendering dominion of one's self." In future, religion will survive and thrive only in those chambers. They can be prised open only by the religious experience of love, tolerance, hope and forgiveness - against the odds and the weight of the evidence.

In the globalised world, religion will be less a cover or substitute for political control, personal ignorance and fear. Religious experience will be the key to opening the deepest chambers of the human heart. Religious traditions will continue to provide tried and tested entrees to these chambers. Religious people will continually fail to match the rhetoric and the reality. But they will hold out the possibility of life beyond the predetermined and self-willed possibilities. Many will find such a quest irrelevant because they are self-sufficient. For the religious person, it will always be a blessing ultimately to depend on the Other.

The standard unreflected consideration of the role of religion in international affairs is that either it is not a factor but simply an indicator or reflector of other differences (social, economic or ethnic) or it is a factor in societies which are regarded as less developed in that they have not yet endured the full brunt of secularisation,

thereby permitting periodic outbursts of fundamentalism. Despite Henry Kissinger's capacity to write his massive 1995 tome *Diplomacy* without even mentioning the role of religion in international politics, all commentators would now accept that religion has a role to play in the wake of September 11, 2001. The problem is being able to invoke the utterances of religious leaders in a way which is equally comprehensible to those outside their circle of faith as to their followers and adherents. In recent years in the Catholic tradition, Pope John Paul II has given public addresses to the UN as well as an annual address to diplomats. He has also given an annual peace message addressed to all people of good will. These addresses make accessible the best of the Catholic religious tradition. Also the advent of the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance has provided a comprehensive UN reporting agency which is able to monitor religious freedom in nation states. In response to the political strength of the religious Right, the United States Congress has established an Office of International Religious Freedom which reports on other countries and an Advisory Commission on Religious Freedom Abroad.

Continuing debate in Australia about appropriate foreign policy responses to the situation in East Timor and to proposed war with Iraq has brought some clarity to what is achievable by a nation state wanting to act as a discerning, realistic moral agent in the international community of nations. As the UN Special Rapporteur observed in his report following his 1997 visit to Australia (##106-7):

Australia therefore provides an original example of integrated multiculturalism and religious tolerance. This multicultural, multiracial and multi-religious edifice, which is in fact recent, is marked by the coexistence of diversity and the management of plurality, while offering the advantage of ensuring respect for the specific character of individual communities and their integration within Australian society.

This unfinished experiment undoubtedly constitutes a contribution by Australia to the international community, in terms of a democratic system of society founded on respect for and the viability of diversity, especially religious diversity. It is worth highlighting the role of established, politically driven institutions, which endeavour to respond to the needs of society, including those of its minorities, and provide ways of alleviating all tensions: these are (a) the judicial system, with judges who recognised many of the liberties of citizens even before the law did, in accordance with the common law system, and the High Court, which has interpreted the principle of religious neutrality in a conciliatory and balanced spirit (allowing public subsidies for denominational schools if granted without distinction) and which defines religion in such a way that most of the new religious movements or sects can find their place in it; and (b) national institutions, such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the Ethnic Affairs Commission.

The Australian government through its support for initiatives such as the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions should be able to share some of the fruits of this "original example of integrated multiculturalism and religious tolerance" with our Asian neighbours. Our main influence for the good of religious freedom should be in our region and with our major trading partners.

It is essential that religious freedom and tolerance not be identified as Australian values but as universal values espoused and adopted by all countries

which are signatories to the 1981 *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*.

Australia should insist that religious freedom and tolerance are incontrovertible indicators of a government's commitment and a society's capacity for individual freedom and enjoyment of basic human rights. Given the religious indifference of many Australians and the Australian Government's disinterest in any particular religion or in religion generally, we are in a strong position to advocate religious freedom for others pointing out that tolerance rather than indifference or secularism is the answer to religious discrimination or persecution. Given that Australia is an increasingly secular society, we are in a strong position to insist that other countries should accord protection to those of minority faiths and also to indicate the advantages of a nation state refraining from establishing or preferring a particular religion. We could not be seen to be pushing a self-interested agenda nor a preference for a particular religious group.

Both domestically and internationally, the Australian Government and NGOs should play their role in nurturing what the Special Rapporteur describes as a culture of tolerance "notably through education, which can make a decisive contribution to the inculcation of human rights values and the emergence of attitudes and behaviour which reflect tolerance and non-discrimination. Thus the schools, which are essential components of the educational system, constitute an essential and unique means of preventing intolerance and discrimination, through the dissemination of a culture of human rights." (#8)

Poverty, economic insecurity, ethnic difference, class conflict, political marginalisation and social instability are often contributing factors and obvious outcomes in situations of acute social unrest. Democracy is the best protection for any majority. The rule of law is the best protection for any minority, however they identify themselves and however they are identified by the majority. There will, for example, continue to be Indonesian Christians who believe that *dwifungsi* of the military is the best available protection of minority Christians against majority Muslims some of whom will be attracted to an expression of more fundamentalist beliefs. Ultimately, this is a poor substitute for a strengthened civil society, greater international collaboration and the rule of law.

Talk of Australian values should stop at the Australian low water mark. Talk of Christian values should be addressed primarily to those who profess to be Christian, including those who might be minded to commit unChristian acts on their Muslim neighbours. It is appropriate to conduct our dialogue in accordance with universal human rights which are not externally imposed western constructs but voluntarily appropriated universal standards. It is appropriate that the NGO sector in Australia (including church groups) give every assistance to foreign NGOs anxious to fortify their own civil society and to call their own government to account by recourse to the UN reporting procedures under these instruments.

In Australia, Muslims and Christians of good will should be able to dialogue together, being a bridge to their co-religionists in other countries, sharing the burden of the moral quandaries which these problems create. While governments will maintain pragmatic commitments to their national interest and good trading relations, private citizens and those in the NGO sector are the ones with greater latitude to espouse the primacy of human rights and individual liberty. Those with greatest freedom will carry the greatest responsibility for fostering a relationship which is productive for all.

In 1998 I attended a human rights seminar in Semarang, Indonesia. A middle class, Chinese Indonesian Catholic asked me about the Australian position on East Timor. He said that the Indonesians could be forgiven because they lived under a repressive regime without a free press. He wondered what possible grounds were there for Australian Catholics living in a democracy with a free press remaining mute for over twenty years?

It was inevitable during that time that successive Australian governments would express a preferred position that the East Timorese make an act of self-determination and freely decide to incorporate themselves into Indonesia. But given that a free choice for the Timorese could then have resulted in a decision against Australia's perceived security and economic interests, where did we Australians stand? We stood against the Timorese in their quest for a free choice insofar as we perceived Timorese interests not to converge with our own. Or at least we presumed to know what was in their best interests.

Many Australians will continue to entertain primitive, simplistic ideas about Islam. There will be ample press coverage to feed their anxieties and concerns. Religious persons committed to espousing the human rights of all, whether they be Christian, Muslim or non-believer, rich or poor, will be able to join hands with other persons of good will constructing a bridge of understanding and respect across differences. Religious persons primarily committed to the political and economic claims of their co-religionists, using religion as an added distinction will maintain a strong barrier.

FECCA's *Australian Mosaic* provides an opportunity for the bridge builders to convince their fellow citizens and government that they are neither romantic idealists nor unprincipled compromisers. We are committed to building the bridge, seeing the problems from the other side of the river, and welcoming the traffic flow across the bridge despite the heavy fog and the sometimes lawless drivers claiming the road to themselves as if it were a one way street. The secularism and materialism of Australian society and the simple majoritarianism of Australian democracy can cloud the vision just as surely as the fundamentalism and poverty of other societies that lack of coverage of the rule of law. Through dialogue, we can avoid the absurd situation of excluding or killing others in the name of God, creating a new situation of including others and prizing the other who is different in the name of God.