

**FAITH MATTERS:
AN INTERFAITH AGENDA FOR A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL AUSTRALIA**

**A SUBMISSION BY THE MEMBERS OF THE AUSTRALIAN
PARTNERSHIP OF RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS (APRO) TO
MEMBERS OF THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT AND
GOVERNMENT**

Given the recent resurgence of religious voices in public discourse and in the light of Australia's long term commitment to and support of Freedom of Religion and Belief APRO makes six recommendations it considers important to the next phase of harmonious and productive interreligious relations in Australia.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

As Australians, there is much we can be proud of in the way the nation has integrated successive waves of immigrants and refugees and in the way we have constructed a multicultural and multifaith civil society. As members of APRO, we wish to focus the way forward around the following recommendations:

Recommendation One: We ask the Australian Parliament to associate itself with the first week of February as the annual UN World Interfaith Week, and hold each year a special multireligious service celebrating the Week

Recommendation Two: The Australian Parliament on the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 events takes up the offer of APRO to consult with our members about the commemorations around that day

Recommendation Three: The Australian Parliament support the conduct of a feasibility study to construct a sacred site to hold multifaith events in times of national celebration, remembrance and tragedy

Recommendation Four: APRO with a well-funded secretariat be appointed to advise federal and state governments on national and international religious and interreligious issues with functions as outlined in Appendix Two, and be supported by PM&C, DFAT and DIAC; and build a network to act as a central hub for interfaith organisations and activities in Australia.

Recommendation Five: DFAT continue to support its current interfaith activities and expand them to include the key global and regional faith/religions and interfaith organisations

Recommendation Six: DFAT highlight in its promotion of the Australian image abroad the culturally diverse and multifaith nature of Australia's civil society

BACKGROUND

1. Faith matters have always been at the centre of Australia's social and political life. With the various migration waves that have peopled the Australian continent, especially since World War II, Australia has become a multireligious mosaic of faith communities, private spiritualities and secularist beliefs with many different and contrasting voices. Interreligious relations are a key aspect of intercommunal relations – whilst there have historically been and there are still such tensions, Australia remains a lighthouse to the world of a harmonious and successful society as attested by the selection of Australia to stage in Melbourne the December 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, the world's largest interfaith gathering. Such harmony, however, can never be taken for granted - interreligious harmony, like governance, is more a process than a state.

2. Multifaith Australia is built on the twin principles of freedom of religion and belief and the separation of religion and state, as reflected in Section 116 of the Constitution. As a democratic and civil society, Australia is a signatory to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, including the right to freedom of religion and belief, and to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.

3. Article 18 of the ICCPR states:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

4. Whilst the Australian Constitution makes mention of God in its preamble, it is insistent that no government can favour any one religious or areligious belief and certainly not create an established religion. A flexibility in the relationship between religion and state has been allowed to emerge during Australia's historical evolution that contrasts with the inflexible arrangements of other similar civil societies. Australia's constitutional designers seem to have been deliberately vague in articulating the national model for the separation of religion and state, a model admired for its moderation and flexibility.

5. As seen in the census figures presented in Appendix One, in the last almost forty years Australia has paradoxically become a more secularist nation with increasingly greater numbers professing no particular religious allegiance. At the same time, due to a number of factors including migration, with the emergence of the multifaith dimension, Australia has become more religious, but religious in a different way. Religious bodies with their commitment to universal values, ethical norms and moral behaviour and to their health, welfare, educational and advocacy organisations contribute, as research has attested, to the social capital or social and economic wealth of the nation. This contribution is well-documented, and the growing intersection between government and religious bodies is seen in

the funding of schools, hospitals, hospices, welfare agencies, programs for the disabled and the aged and so on.

6. The tables in Appendix One highlight how Australia's religious profile has changed since 1947. Religious diversity is also not evenly spread across Australia as shown in the table presenting the religious composition of each state and territory. Those who answer as Buddhists are present at levels above the national average in New South Wales, Victoria, The Australian Capital Territory and other territories (Territory of Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Territory of Christmas Island, and Jervis Bay Territory). Muslims are concentrated in New South Wales, Victoria and other territories, while Hindus are in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT. This is to be expected of migrant groups as Melbourne and Sydney have been the primary recipients of migrants for decades. Those declaring 'no religion' are disproportionately high in South Australia, Western Australia, The Northern Territory and the ACT. Each Christian denomination has a different spread across Australia. Those who answer as Anglicans are weakest in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Those who answer as Catholics are notably underrepresented in Tasmania. The fact of these regional differences means that Australians experience religious diversity differently depending on where they live and work.

7. Australia is thus a mosaic of religious and secular voices that are different and contrasting. Balancing these voices is the continuous task of government in a constitutionally required policy of positive neutrality towards the different religions and beliefs. But nested in this neutrality are facilitatory and monitoring functions. Because from one perspective Australia is a religious marketplace where the religions are fundamentally in competition with each other and because religion can be aligned with destructive nationalisms and other dangerous ideologies, government has a facilitatory function in ensuring that interreligious relationships are harmonious. It also has a monitoring function to guard against destructive, perhaps violent, extremism and patterns of behaviour such as systemic sexual abuse.

8. The 2011 report to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21st Century Australia*, after an Australia-wide consultation, concluded that "the most definitive finding is the enormous breadth and range of voices, the complexity of debate, the shifting nature of contexts and accommodation of opposing voices. The research process did find much middle ground in views and expectations, and the research process itself was a learning experience for most participants. In conclusion, increases in religious diversity, and the emergence of significant religious communities have changed the context of the consideration of issues related to Freedom of Religion and Belief. There is a need to develop appropriate responses to the unique and varied Australian religious contexts and settings, including ancient Indigenous traditions, Christian heritages and minority faith communities. There is a pressing need for education about religion to reduce ignorance and fear while promoting intergroup respect. There is a current of anti-Muslim discourse that betrays an entrenched hostility often related to overseas events. The accommodation of genuine religious differences has not become easier." (Bouma, Cahill, Dellal and Zwartz 2011, p. 100)

9. APRO affiliates have also been engaged in interfaith work over a long period of time although much of this was unrecognised. Individuals formed a number of groups and organisations supporting dialogue and cooperation between faiths. There are now a number of formal bilateral and multilateral dialogues and networks. Multicultural and interfaith groups have been in cooperation even though each has different purposes and many multifaith activities, particularly at local level, have emerged. From 1993, Faith Communities for Reconciliation engaged with all but the very smallest faith/religious groups in Australia. Such activities facilitated the later flowering of interfaith activities. Perhaps because interreligious relationships in Australia have been so harmonious, interfaith activity has not sufficiently come to the attention of policy makers, although this changed with the

events of 9/11 in New York and Washington and the subsequent Bali bombings. Regional Interfaith Dialogues, government outreach to Australian Muslims and the 2009 Melbourne Parliament of World's Religions, supported by the three levels of government, demonstrate this change in perception of the significance of interfaith activities.

10. Federal and state parliamentarians have been very supportive in attending ethnic and religious community functions as part of forging amongst newer and more established Australian groups the sense of participation and the sense of belonging that lie, as recent research suggests, at the base of social cohesion and Australian citizenship. Many other positive initiatives have emerged from the challenges presented since the terrorist events of 2001. However, some religious groups and their leaders have been reluctant to participate in interfaith activities.

11. It is a truism that there cannot be peace in the world or social cohesion in a society unless there is peace between the religions. Interfaith cooperation is at the core of a multicultural Australia. The 1989 bipartisan statement articulated a multicultural social and economic policy in terms of (1) commitment to Australia and (2) equality of opportunity built around the fixed points of parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, freedom of religion, equality of the sexes and the English language. It is then founded on (i) maintenance and development of cultural, linguistic and religious heritages (ii) access to and equitable distribution of government resources and (iii) economic efficiency, which implies the productive utilisation of the diversity of knowledge and skills of all Australians for national well-being. In the past decade, state and federal governments have been funding various interfaith initiatives. This interfaith agenda aims to build on such initiatives and give greater cohesion in forging the way forward.

12. Currently in Australia, the chief umbrella body is the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations with funding tied to that for the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia. There are about 30 municipally based local interfaith networks in high migrant density areas. Led by the example of the City of Greater Dandenong, these have been part of a community groundswell in response to the terrorist attacks and attempted attacks of the past decade. There have been many private initiatives such as the Melbourne Interfaith Centre, and some universities such as the Australian Catholic, Griffiths, Monash and RMIT Universities have played critical roles in researching about religion, terrorism, social cohesion and interfaith. Whilst much has been achieved, interfaith activity needs to be taken to a new level, both nationally across Australia and within the international network.

One particular example of an effective dialogue group is the Women's Interfaith Network in NSW formed in 1998, which is spreading rapidly, with a core group meeting at the NSW Parliament House and branches throughout greater Sydney. Other initiatives include a dialogue of Muslims, Christians and Jews, in which the official representatives of leadership bodies participate on a regular basis, and an annual Abraham Conference organised by an Islamic inter-faith body. There are also joint initiatives for exchange visits between different religiously based schools and talks by representatives by different religions.

13. At the international level, Australia lives in a very religious world, especially in the Asian and Pacific Basin. In 2002, the Pew Global Attitudes Project surveyed 44 countries (not including Australia), measuring the importance of religion in people's lives. In Africa, no fewer than eight-in-ten in every country saw religion as very important personally. Majorities in every Latin American country prioritised religion similarly, with the exception of Argentina (only 39%). In Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Mali and Senegal, more than nine-in-ten considered religion as very important in their lives though less so in Turkey (65%) and particularly Uzbekistan (35%). In the United Kingdom, 33 per cent considered religion as very important. Religion is very important in all Asian countries

surveyed (Indonesia 95%, India 92%, the Philippines 88% and Bangladesh 88%) with the exception of South Korea (25%), Viet Nam (24%) and Japan (12%). In the United States of America 59 per cent of the population consider that religion is very important in their lives. Australians need to understand these very high rates of religiosity which impacts on many aspects on international life, not least trade and security.

14. DFAT has commendably initiated a series of annual interfaith dialogues with countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and New Zealand. But DFAT is not well-equipped nor sufficiently funded to respond to its responsibilities in the international interfaith area, and it does not link in sufficiently to the local Australian interfaith structure such as it is. A pre-eminent example of the lack of funding is that representatives of the Chinese Committee on Religions for Peace have twice made visits to Australia but lack of funding have made reciprocation impossible. It can never be said that interfaith activity is the antidote to religiously inspired terrorism but it is part of any risk mitigation strategy. And it can cement international relations as all religions except for Australia's indigenous religions are transnational in their activity and influence.

15. An important recent event has been the proclamation by the General Assembly of the United Nations in October 2010 of an annual World Interfaith Week (February 1 – 7). This will now present the opportunity to the Australian nation, both nationally and internationally, to reflect on the importance of interreligious understanding and cooperation in the pursuit of global peace and national cohesion.

16. Given the advances in the almost ten years since 9/11, mixed and insufficiently funded though they be, we hope that our "Recommendations for the Way Forward " will be of assistance in formulating appropriate Government policy.



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31 March 2011

APPENDIX ONE

AUSTRALIA'S RELIGIOUS PROFILE

Table 1: The number and proportion of selected Australian religious groups in the 1947, 1971, 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses

Religious Identification*	1947 000s	%	1971 000s	%	1996 000s	%	2001 000s	%	2006 000s	%
CHRISTIAN										
Anglican	2957	39.0	3953	31.0	3903	22.0	3881	20.7	3,718	18.7
Baptist	114	1.5	176	1.4	295	1.7	309	1.7	317	1.6
Catholic	1570	20.7	3443	27.0	4799	27.0	5002	26.7	5,127	25.8
Lutheran	67	0.9	197	1.5	250	1.4	250	1.3	251	1.3
MPCRU**	1678	22.1	2199	17.2	2011	11.3	1887	10.1	1,732	8.7
Orthodox	17	0.2	339	2.7	497	2.8	529	2.8	544	2.7
Pentecostal	--	--	--	--	175	1.0	195	1.0	220	1.1
OCG***	270	3.8	683	5.4	653	4.4	711	3.7	777	4.0
Total Christian	6,673	88.0	10,990	86.2	12,583	70.6	12,764	68.0	12,686	63.9
BUDDHISTS	--	--	--	--	200	1.1	358	1.9	419	2.1
HINDUS	--	--	--	--	67	0.4	95	0.5	148	0.7
JEWS	32	0.4	62	0.5	80	0.5	84	0.4	89	0.4
MUSLIMS	--	--	22	0.2	201	1.1	282	1.5	340	1.7
OTHER****	4	0.1	14	0.1	69	0.4	92	0.5	109	0.5
Total	37	0.5	99	0.8	617	3.5	911	4.8	1,105	5.6
Inadequate Desc	19	0.2	29	0.2	54	0.3	352	1.9	134	0.7
No Religion	26	0.3	856	6.7	2949	16.5	2905	15.5	3707	18.7
Not Stated	825	10.9	781	6.1	1551	8.7	1836	9.8	2224	11.2
Total Population	7,579		12,756		17,753		18,769		19,855	

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

* Only those Christian groups larger than 1% and other groups 0.4% and larger in 2006 have been included.

** MPCRU combines the data for the Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed and Uniting Churches. The Uniting Church was formed in 1977 in a merger of Congregational, Methodist and about half of the Presbyterians. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

*** OCG – Other Christian Groups less than 1%.

****Other religious groups less than 0.4% of the population

Table 2 Changes in Australia's Religious Profile 1996-2006 - Christian Groups (groups 0.1% and over).

Religious Identification	1996 000s	%	2001 000s	%	2006 000s	%	2001-2006 % growth rate
CHRISTIAN*							
Anglican	3,903	21.99	3,881	20.68	3,718	18.73	-4.20
Baptist	295	1.66	309	1.65	317	1.60	2.59
Brethren	22	0.12	19	0.10	24	0.12	26.32
Catholic	4,799	27.03	5,002	26.65	5,127	25.82	2.50
Churches of Christ	75	0.42	61	0.33	55	0.28	-9.84
Jehovah's Witnesses	83	0.47	81	0.43	81	0.41	0.00
Latter Day Saints	45	0.25	50	0.27	53	0.27	6.00
Lutheran	250	1.41	250	1.33	251	1.26	0.40
Oriental Christian/Orthodox	31	0.18	36	0.19	33	0.17	-8.33
Orthodox	497	2.8	529	2.82	544	2.74	2.84
Pentecostal	175	0.98	195	1.04	220	1.11	12.82
Presbyterian/Reformed	676	3.81	638	3.4	597	3.01	-6.43
Salvation Army	74	0.42	71	0.38	64	0.32	-9.86
Seventh Day Adventist	53	0.3	54	0.29	55	0.28	1.85
Uniting	1,335	7.52	1,249	6.65	1,135	5.72	-9.13
Other Christian	253	1.43	324	1.72	411	2.07	26.85
Total Christian	12,583	70.55	12,764	68.00	12,685	63.89	-0.62
National Population	17,753		18,769		19,855		5.79

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

Table 3 - Changes in Australia's Religious Profile 1996-2006 – Other Religious Groups (0.01% and over).

Religious Identification	1996	1996	2001	2001	2006	2006	2001 to 2006
	000s	%	000s	%	000s	%	Growth Rate %
BUDDHISTS	200	1.13	358	1.91	419	2.11	17.0
HINDUS	67	0.38	95	0.51	148	0.75	55.8
JEWS	80	0.45	84	0.45	89	0.45	6.0
MUSLIMS	201	1.13	282	1.5	340	1.71	20.6
OTHER							
Aboriginal Traditional Rel	7	0.04	5	0.03	5	0.03	3.0
Baha'i	9	0.05	11	0.06	12	0.06	9.1
Chinese religions	4	0.02	4	0.02	4	0.02	0.0
Druse	2	0.01	2	0.01	3	0.02	50.0
Japanese religions	1	0.01	1	0.01	1	0.01	0.0
Nature religions							
<i>Paganism</i>	4	0.02	11	0.06	16	0.08	45.5
<i>Wicca/witchcraft</i>	2	0.01	9	0.05	8	0.04	-11.1
<i>Other</i>	4	0.02	4	0.02	6	0.03	50.0
<i>Total Nature Religions</i>	10	0.05	24	0.13	29	0.15	20.8
Rastafariansim	1	0.01	1	0.01	1	0.01	0.0
Satanism	2	0.01	2	0.01	2	0.01	0.0
Scientology	1	0.01	2	0.01	3	0.02	50.0
Sikhism	12	0.07	17	0.09	26	0.13	52.9
Spiritualism	8	0.05	9	0.05	10	0.05	11.1
Theism	2	0.01	3	0.02	3	0.02	0.0
Zoroastrians	2	0.01	2	0.02	2	0.01	0.0
Other Other Religions	8	0.04	10	0.04	11	0.06	10.0
OTHER RELIGIONS Total	69	0.39	92	0.5	109	0.55	18.5
NO RELIGION							
Agnostics	9	0.05	18	0.09	22	0.11	22.2
Atheists	7	0.04	24	0.13	31	0.16	29.2
Humanists	4	0.02	5	0.03	8	0.04	60.0
Rationalists	1	0.01	2	0.01	2	0.01	0.0
NO RELIGION nfd	2928	16.36	2856	15.22	3644	18.35	27.6
NO RELIGION Total	2949	16.5	2905	15.5	3707	18.67	27.6
NOT STATED / INADEQUATE							
Not Stated	1551	8.67	1836	9.78	2224	11.20	21.1
Inadequate Description	54	0.31	352	1.88	134	0.67	-61.7
NOT STATED / INADEQUATE Total	1605	8.98	2188	11.7	2358	11.88	7.8
NATIONAL POPULATION	17,753		18,769		19,855		5.8

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

(a) Significant changes may have occurred where populations are less than 4,000 and growth % is 0. In each case, changes may equal several hundred. These are not expressed here due to rounding.

APPENDIX TWO

FUNCTIONS PROPOSED FOR APRO

The functions APRO propose to engage in would be:

1. to advise the Commonwealth Government on all matters pertaining to faith communities and inter-faith harmony and co-operation for the social and economic well-being of Australia and to safeguarding it from extremism of all kinds
2. to provide informed advice, based on consultation with faith community leaders and their communities, on policies and programs relevant to inter-faith harmony and co-operation and to monitor and evaluate them
3. to design, in association with heads of faith communities, ceremonies, services and pageants at times of national and international celebration, remembrances and tragedies that reflect the unity of Australia's multi-faith society
4. to provide informed advice to government on policy and practice related to the entry into Australia of religious personnel on a permanent and temporary basis
5. to oversee and monitor appropriate orientation and inservice programs for religious personnel newly arrived in Australia, for religious marriage celebrants and for religious personnel generally
6. to disseminate to faith communities and their leaders material on government policies and programs, including through the electronic network of faith leaders and their communities
7. to support and work with local government authorities in establishing and maintaining local multi-faith networks
8. to work with the community, including the media, in educating the public about the role and function of faith traditions in local, national and international affairs
9. to promote, in liaison with DFAT, nationally and internationally Australia's image and reputation as a model of inter-faith harmony
10. to monitor the websites of Australia's ethnic and faith communities for material or links damaging to Australia's social cohesion
11. to work for, in liaison with State and Commonwealth educational authorities, interaction and co-operation between Australia's government and religious schools and for the design of appropriate curricula
12. to develop a resource centre for appropriate government and community use