

**National interfaith forum on  
*Religious values and the value of religion***

**Wednesday 22 February 2017, 10.00 am - 4.00 pm  
Strangers Function Room, NSW Parliament House**

**Report**

“Religious values and the value of religion” was the theme of a national interfaith forum attended by 100 Australians from diverse faith backgrounds at NSW Parliament House on Wednesday 22 February.

Hosted by the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO), the forum provided a space for Christians from various denominations, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahá'ís and others to come together to explore the value of religion and the place of religious values in our diverse society. Representatives from government, academia and the media also attended.

The forum began with a keynote address by Professor the Hon Kristina Keneally, the first woman to become Premier of NSW. Reflecting on her personal journey as an “openly Catholic” feminist woman, she explored the complex linkages between religion, faith, values and politics in a secular society. She said it was wrong to say that religion has no role to play in political discourse, as we are all influenced by the experiences, beliefs and worldview that we bring to public life; we are all spiritual beings. The more important question to ask, she said, is how well our politicians understand the faith of their fellow citizens, and how it shapes and motivates them.

NSW Minister for Multiculturalism, the Hon Ray Williams MP, and NSW Shadow Minister for Multiculturalism, Ms Sophie Cotsis MP, both spoke to the forum, expressing their appreciation for APRO and its important work of bringing faith communities together. The federal Assistant Minister for Social Services and Multicultural Affairs, Senator the Hon Zed Seselja, addressed a message to the forum in which he stated “APRO plays a vital role in fostering community harmony through interfaith dialogues such as this national forum. I believe in the power of people of all faiths in join in conversation, and help build an even more united Australia”.

A panel discussion moderated by the Rev Dr David Gill, former General Secretary of the Uniting Church in Australia and the National Council of Churches in Australia, brought leading members of the various faith

communities into a conversation which explored what are religious values, whether there are values shared across the faith traditions, what value religion can add to our public discourse, and how faith communities can work together to demonstrate and strengthen the value of religion in Australian society. The members of the panel were Buddhist nun Ven. Wu Chin, Muslim Shaykh Haisam Farache, Hindu nun Rev Pravrajika Gayatripana, Sikh Council Secretary Mr Bawa Singh Jagdev OAM, Jewish Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio, Uniting Church Moderator Rev Myung Hwa Park, and Baha'i discourse officer Ms Ida Walker.

In roundtable discussions, the participants were invited to identify key issues facing contemporary Australia that have a real bearing on the spiritual and material progress of our society. Among the major issues identified were:

- Inclusion and social cohesion: overcoming intolerance and prejudice
- Freedom of religion and freedom of speech
- Loss of faith in our institutions (religious and secular)
- Education about religion and religious literacy
- Violence and abuse
- Environment and sustainability
- Engagement with secular society and institutions
- Inequality: Creating a more equitable world
- Women's leadership
- Migration and refugee policy
- The role of youth and the search for meaning

Subsequent roundtables identified shared religious values that can help address these issues, explored how people from different faiths could work together on them, and developed recommendations to government, faith communities and individuals (see attached outcomes document).

A presentation by Michelle Hamlin on behalf of the Organ and Tissue Authority provided a practical demonstration of religious values in action by describing its work with religious leaders to improve education about organ donation within Australia's diverse faith communities.

The forum was co-convened by Josie Lacey OAM and Dr Natalie Mobini on behalf of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO), with sponsorship by the Organ and Tissue Authority and the Australian Multicultural Foundation.

## **Outcomes of roundtable discussions**

### **Inclusion and social cohesion: overcoming intolerance and prejudice**

#### Religious values that can help:

- Draw on values of inclusion and social cohesion from our own traditions.
- Shared humanity
- Respect and diversity

#### Recommendations to government:

- Listen to the diverse voices from each tradition
- Promote and support joint initiatives

#### Recommendations to faith communities:

- Examine our own failures and who we “other” and exclude
- Inter-faith dialogue needs to extend beyond the Abrahamic traditions.
- Name our differences, listen to one another and learn from one another.
- We need to examine our own traditions and aspects of our traditions that are intolerant, discriminatory and prejudiced.

#### Recommendations to individuals:

- Find common ground
- Practise hospitality, inclusion and keeping in mind who has been left out
- Practise intentional inclusion.

### **Freedom of religion and freedom of speech**

#### Religious values that can help:

- Draw on religious values of dialogue, common commitment to the principle of reciprocity and mutual respect

#### Recommendations to government:

- Government could pass a Commonwealth Religious Freedom Act as recommended by HREOC in 1998.
- Support for retention of Article 18C of the Race Discrimination Act
- Appropriate law is important but the law is only the framework.
- Government continue to encourage dialogue between religious faiths
- Government invite religious leaders and representatives to policy development roundtables and include religious representatives in secular policy discussion

#### Recommendations to faith communities:

- Many difficulties between and about faith can be resolved through interfaith dialogue networks and principles. We need to create networks that can talk to each other.
- Faith communities continue to engage in dialogue and teach constituents to listen and promote respect and reciprocity.
- Engage with each other in dialogue and encourage those with difficulties to become involved in the dialogue.

#### Recommendations to individuals:

- Individuals to develop empathy and a listening ear.
- Know people of other faiths personally so they are no longer “the other”
- Respectfully express your beliefs and values so that they are heard and understood
- Practise respect for other people in accordance with the principle of reciprocity

### **Loss of faith in institutions (religious and secular)**

#### Religious values that can help:

- Draw on our values and live them: less hypocrisy
- Being humble and leading by serving
- Have the courage to be truthful and open. This means moving beyond trying to protect ourselves and our institutions to helping the victims.

#### Recommendations to government:

- Support more multi-faith worship/meeting places (ie. places where multiple faiths come together)
- Greater religious literacy needed for politicians

#### Recommendations to faith communities:

- Major faiths to educate and expose their congregations to various faiths
- Local religious communities to mix and share more.
- Initiate multi-faith welfare activities
- Break down patriarchy
- Become more open
- Responsibility is not just on faith leadership but community too
- Build more respect within organisations – less top-down management, more consultative.
- Improve response to crisis situations

### **Education about religion and religious literacy**

#### Religious values that can help:

- Combatting fear and ignorance
- Compassion
- Developing awareness of our connectivity

- A sense of inquiry and seeking truth

#### Recommendations to government:

- Formal reviews of education in religion at every level
- Work towards general religious education from K-12 with trained teachers
- Need to develop resources that can assist teachers in this regard.
- A multimedia platform is a possibility
- Develop partnerships across all sectors – government, scholars, faith leaders, educators and community

#### Recommendations to faith communities:

- Interfaith working groups at national and state levels to look at current curriculum and how we can improve it.
- This can only be done with assistance and input from faith communities working together.
- Peak bodies can assist

#### Recommendations to individuals:

- Encourage and build a culture of inquiry and a culture of compassion.

### **Violence and abuse**

#### Religious values that can help address the issue:

- Greater awareness needs to be made within our faiths of our true religious values.
- Equality of men and women, and of all people and genders, is found in all religions.
- Need to move beyond cultural relativity in regards to issues of violence and see it as a human rights issue. Human rights abuse is human rights abuse.

#### Recommendations to government:

- Education is the bottom line and the long-term solution to the issue.
- Start with schools and addressing bullying, also community education.
- Women's shelters suitable for multicultural community are important.

#### Recommendations to faith communities:

- Importance of educating congregations
- Help communities overcome the social and cultural stigma attached to the victim.
- There are issues around abuse of drugs/alcohol and violence.
- Dominance and inequality leads to violence.
- Women need to be empowered.

#### Recommendations to individuals:

- We can work together through: forums, conversations, social media, inviting to each other's homes and places of worship

## **Environment and sustainability:**

### Religious values that can help address the issue:

- Spiritual reformation is needed to overcome greed and apathy
- God is in everything, we are all inter-connected, including inter-generationally, and we need to look at our ethics of sustainability in this light
- Creation is a gift to be cherished.
- Core values of compassion, empathy, concern for future generations and indigenous communities
- Consumer culture versus contentment.
- Little in our culture calls for self-regulation. Emphasis is placed on growth not sustainability. We need an ethic of "enough is enough", over-consumption is waste
- Concern over the amount of energy needed to produce meat

### Recommendations to government:

- There is a crisis – knowledge and action are required.
- There are many issues to address: climate change, loss of biodiversity, Great Barrier Reef, water, food production, renewable energy, oceans, the need to move away from coal
- See faith communities as a voice, and as a resource
- Consult faith communities on matters of public policy
- Education for women is crucial. Gender equality will influence population growth

### Recommendations to faith communities:

- Each religion should re-read its religious texts in light of scientific knowledge and ecological concerns
- Religion can be in dialogue with scientists regarding faith values and scientific knowledge about climate change
- The Faith Ecology Network provides a natural space for doing things together.

### Recommendations to individuals:

- Human capacity for care: fulfilling our human role involves responsibility
- People of faith can be involved as environmental educators with others in the wider community
- In a globalised world we need to be aware of where food comes from and the impact of production

## **Engagement with secular society and institutions**

### Recommendations to government:

- The loss of community in Australia is a challenge, and this is an area where religion, with its focus on community building, can play a big role.

#### Recommendations to faith communities:

- We have to engage with public society as a whole
- Religions need to be seen as being pro-active about issues rather than being reactive. It doesn't mean that we have the answers, but we are learning with everyone else about these.
- Religions will need to be better able to share their stories of successes with others in a way that is accessible.
- We need language that allows religion and those who are non-religious to speak to one another.
- Religions need to move away from protecting themselves and work towards their intended purpose which is to serve those around them.

#### Recommendations to individuals:

- Faith needs to be action orientated towards the good of those around us and each home should be a centre of community building.

### **Inequality: creating a more equitable world:**

#### Religious values that can help:

- Turn from material based values to spiritual based values in society
- Wealth does not equal contentment.
- Put others good above your own

#### Recommendations to government:

- Equity covers many areas: gender equity and empowering women, environmental equity, refugees, indigenous communities
- Government budget to look at more humane, flat pay structures for organisations
- Non-Partisan approach needs to be taken

#### Recommendations to faith communities:

- Need to also promote each other's faiths
- More interfaith community and messages of interfaith harmony.
- Ask indigenous people for advice

#### Recommendations to individuals:

- Positive messages, be part of the good and agent for change (not criticising, bringing each other down, but lifting each other up)
- Start at the grassroots
- Increasing education/education in family
- Exercise positive citizenship, engaged in action



