



## Centre for **Research on Social Inclusion**

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deseccularisation of Australian  
multiculturalism

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# **'A Christian, a Muslim and a Jew walk into a room...': Inter-faith dialogue and the desecularisation of Australian multiculturalism**

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This paper grew out of something I kept noticing in my own life. Over the last couple of years, I have been getting more and more invitations to inter-faith activities, usually involving Christians, Muslims and Jews. At first I wondered why I was getting invitations to religious events, seeing I am not religious and have never been a member of any religious organisation (except for being an escapee of the Catholic school system). Gradually it dawned on me that these events were the same kinds of things that used to be called anti-racism workshops or general discussions about some aspect of cultural diversity or race relations. This got me thinking about the role of religion in current activities around multiculturalism in Australia.

While there has been substantial discussion about governments contracting out community services to religious organisations like the Salvos and Mission Australia, there has been virtually no analysis of the rise of faith-based projects in the migrant community sector. Yet in this arena, there does appear to be a gradual expansion of the framework of inter-faith understanding, at the expense of the framework of race relations. This paper documents the rise of the inter-faith framework, and poses some questions about the potential political implications of this shift.

## **The religious revival**

Around the world, we are witnessing the revival of religion in social life. Public religion is making a comeback, with religious institutions becoming more mobilised, and religion featuring heavily in many governments' political discourse and public policy. In the social sciences, scholars are questioning the long-established equation of modernity with secularism. In the last few decades, from the Islamic revolution in Iran to the rise of the religious right in the US, religion has 're-engaged with political history' (Hecló 2001, p. 15).

The re-emergence of religion in public life has coincided with the rise of a 'clash of civilisations' framework for understanding inter-cultural relations, particularly since the September 11 attacks. Sociologist Gary Bouma (2005, p. 49) argues that 'No one event has so clearly established the return of religion to significance in global human life as the attacks of September 11, 2001'.

Within societies, migration and globalisation have forced the interaction of religious groups that previously had little direct contact. As Bouma (2005, p. 50) writes, the likelihood of conflict has escalated with the presence of 'intensified ideologies of conflict stemming from residual and renewed Christian missionary zeal, new found Pentecostal zeal, Wahabbist theologies of Islamic purity and domination, as well as conflicting political interests'.

Thus policy makers are paying closer attention to the implications of religious diversity in countries like Australia. As sociologist Andrew Jakubowicz (2005, p. 51) notes, a decade ago, religion 'hardly ruffled the surface of multicultural Australia'. Today, it has become the 'central arena of dispute for Australian multiculturalism, the arena most fraught with anxious hostilities' (Jakubowicz 2005, p. 54). The response, from government circles and from many community groups, has been to engage in inter-faith dialogue.

### **What is inter-faith dialogue?**

In 2004, the Australian government published a resource manual promoting inter-faith initiatives and offering advice on setting up local activities (Cahill & Leahy 2004). In it, they defined inter-faith cooperation as:

the different faith communities not just living harmoniously side-by-side (though this is a good beginning), but actively knowing about and respecting each other and each other's beliefs in fair and honourable competition (Cahill & Leahy 2004, p. 12).

In order to actively learn about others' beliefs, most inter-faith projects involve groups of Christians, Muslims and Jews (other faiths are rarely represented), meeting to discuss their respective religions. Groups usually also visit each others' places of worship, and celebrate others' religious festivals.

Some examples:

- In 2003 the National Council of Churches in Australia received \$50,000 from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) to coordinate 'Journey of Promise', a project involving young Christians, Muslims and Jews celebrating Eid el Fitr at Zetland Mosque, Chanukah at the Great Synagogue in Sydney, and Orthodox Christmas at an Armenian Church (FECCA 2003)
- In 2005 the Jewish Community Council of South Australia received \$100,000 from DIMA to run 'Project Abraham: Reaching out to the country', which aims to develop partnerships of Jewish, Muslim and Christian organizations across Australia. Through weekly seminars, the partnerships explore the different perspective each religion brings to contemporary social issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, environmental degradation.

Inter-faith projects have become very popular among people working in community relations in the last three years (see Kerkyasharian 2005, p. 2). Cahill *et al.* (2004, p. 85) report that the September 11 attacks led to a 'proliferation' of inter-faith initiatives and organisations, although starting from a very low base.

However, there had been some notable inter-faith activities before 9/11, for example (Cahill *et al.* 2004, p. 86):

- the various Councils for Christian-Jewish Relations which have worked for many years in Sydney and Melbourne

- the Columban Fathers' centre in Sydney to support Christian-Muslim relationships, and
- the major inter-faith organisation, the Australian chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace

Since September 11, at the national level, we have seen the establishment of several peak body inter-faith initiatives (Cahill *et al.* 2004, p. 88):

- The Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews, launched in 2003, brings together the National Council of Churches in Australia, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.
- The Muslim-Christian Action Team (MCAT) involves Affinity, a Turkish Muslim group, the Uniting Church of Australia, the Columban Centre and the Catholic Commission for Ecumenical and Inter-Faith Relations
- The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia has initiated a dialogue with Islamic organisations
- The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) has established APERO (Australian Partnership of Ethnic and Religious Organisations)

### **The role of inter-faith dialogue in Australian multiculturalism**

Government funding for inter-faith activities comes from DIMA at the federal level, as part of its 'multicultural affairs' brief. For the federal government then, inter-cultural relations are increasingly framed as inter-faith relations. In their eyes, combating intolerance requires not conventional secular anti-racism strategies, but initiatives that place religion at the core.

Many advocates of inter-faith dialogue are open critics of secularism. In their government-commissioned report, Cahill and Leahy (2004: 10) note: 'Now that religion is at world centre stage, the interfaith challenge has become a necessity. And the answers to the world's current political and religious problems partly lie not in a secularism that often triggers a religious extremism, but in religious moderation and in ecumenical and interfaith activity'. This is the sense in which Australian multiculturalism is being desecularised. Cross-cultural communication and education are increasingly being conducted through the framework of religion.

I should note here that in many ways the term 'desecularisation' is misleading in that it assumes that what we had previously was genuinely secular. Of course this ignores the deep Christian influences in Australian public life. For example, the only religious holidays officially recognised are Christian ones; Christian prayers mark the opening of parliaments and councils, and so on. It is often only when people from other faiths make claims for recognition that the unspoken Christianity of our public institutions is exposed. As Matthias Koenig writes, migrants' claims to religious recognition show that 'political institutions and collective identities are considerably less "secular" and certainly less "neutral" than often assumed in the self-images of modern nation-states' (Koenig 2005, p. 4).

Nevertheless, religiosity has gained a new level of explicit recognition in public policy in recent years. In the multicultural arena, this is clearly evident in the Department of Immigration's 'Living in Harmony' program.

### **Case study: Inter-faith dialogue in the Living in Harmony program**

The Department of Immigration describes its Living in Harmony program as 'a proactive, non-confrontational initiative dedicated to increasing the already high levels of social cohesion and tolerance of racial, religious and cultural diversity that exists in Australia' (DIMA 2006b). The program promotes Harmony Day on March 21 each year, and provides community organisations with grants of up to \$50,000 to conduct projects that address some form of intolerance in the local area.

Typical projects funded last year included (DIMA 2006a):

- Grafton Community College's 'You + Me = Us', which features people from diverse backgrounds participating in music, cooking, craft & story-telling workshops
- The Coffs Harbour Police and Community Youth Club's 'Harmony Puppet Project', which involves young people from diverse backgrounds participating in art workshops to produce a script for a puppet show about racism and harmony
- The Australian Red Cross project, 'Culture Awareness through Recreational Experience' (CARE) - involves the mentoring of young migrants and refugees via Red Cross youth groups and recreational activities

And of course, there were also a large number of projects involving inter-faith dialogue. Each year, the Living in Harmony program identifies several areas of priority for funding. For the last two years, inter-faith and religious diversity has been the top funding priority, and this is reflected in the number of grants going to inter-faith activities.<sup>1</sup>

'Inter-faith understanding' emerged as a priority area for funding in 2003. Presumably in response to the September 11 attacks and domestic events involving Muslim asylum seekers and Muslim gang rapists, the government encouraged projects that promoted inter-faith understanding, 'such as providing local residents with the opportunity to learn about other faiths in the community, or providing opportunities for collective understanding between religious groups as ways of addressing community disharmony' (DIMIA 2003, p. 11). In previous years, harmony was conceptualised exclusively as inter-cultural understanding and exchange - faith and religion were not seen as causes of disharmony.

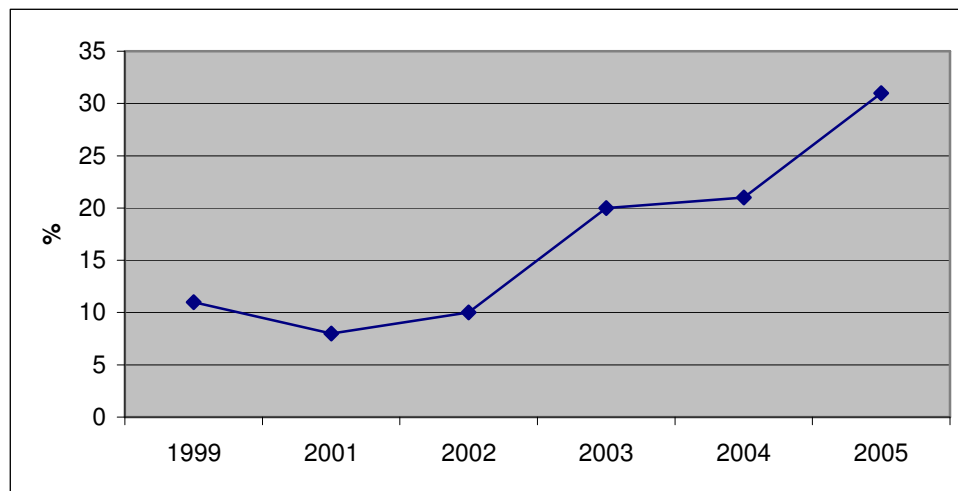
The shift is clearly evident in the figures on grants awarded under the scheme, with the funding of religious organisations and inter-faith projects increasing dramatically from 2003. Between 2002 and 2003, the proportion of Living in Harmony grants going to religious organisations doubled from 10 to 20 per cent, and by 2005, more

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005 and 2006, following inter-faith and religious diversity, the other three funding priority areas have been: new and emerging migrant communities, school and educational communities, Indigenous Australians (DIMA, 2006a).

than 30 per cent of all grants were going to religious organisations, which include religious schools and charities (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Percentage of religious organisations funded under the LIH program**



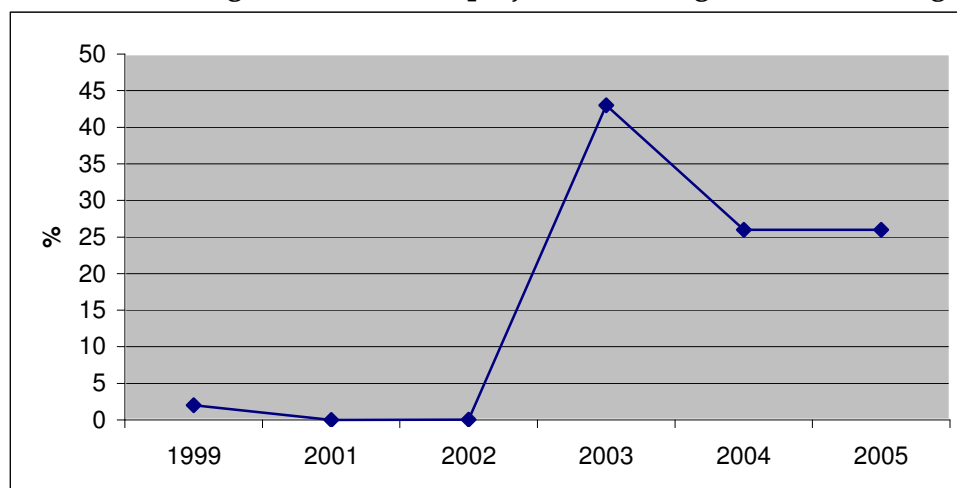
**Source:** compiled from DIMA (2006a)

Not all grants going to religious organisations are for religiously-oriented projects. For example, last year, one third of the grants awarded to religious organisations were for projects unrelated to religion. The Jesuit Social Services in Victoria were funded for a project to combat racist abuse by spectators at junior soccer matches. The Uniting Church in South Australia ran meetings between Sudanese tribal groups and other Australians (DIMA 2006a).

Many projects involving inter-faith dialogue have been coordinated by non-religious organisations, such as local councils, schools, universities, neighbourhood centres and migrant services centres. In fact in 2003, more than half (53 per cent) of the inter-faith projects were run by non-religious organisations (calculated from DIMA 2006a).

So the number of grants going specifically to projects involving inter-faith dialogue has risen even more dramatically than the number going to religious organisations. In the first four years of the scheme, less than five per cent of grants went to inter-faith projects. This skyrocketed to 43 per cent in 2003, before settling down to 26 per cent in 2004 and 2005 (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Percentage of funded LIH projects involving inter-faith dialogue**



**Source:** compiled from DIMA (2006a)

Most of these projects focus exclusively on inter-faith dialogue. They provide inter-faith meetings, religious workshops and exchange programs, often working in consultation with religious leaders in the area. They may also involve youth camps, public forums, and the production of inter-faith resource kits. A small number of projects include an inter-faith component within a more broadly conceived project of inter-cultural engagement. For example, the Geelong Ethnic Communities Council's project in 2005 included school workshops on Indigenous people and newly arrived migrants, as well as an inter-faith forum and a women's forum (DIMA, 2006a).

So obviously this is a key reason why I have been getting more and more invitations to inter-faith events. The government has been spending millions on these activities over the last three years.

### **A red herring?**

How effective are these inter-faith activities? Do they really get at the causes of racism or intolerance in Australia? Is it true that learning about other people's faiths will lead to greater respect between different groups? Let's take a step back and look at the overall role of religion in the lives of Australians.

According to the 2001 Census, almost three quarters (74 per cent) of Australian adults have a religious affiliation (ABS, 2004). However, only a minority of Australians actually participate in religious activities. In the ABS General Social Survey in 2002, only 23 per cent of Australian adults participated in church or religious activities during the three months prior to interview (ABS, 2004). Therefore less than a quarter of all Australians can be said to have a real attachment to places of worship or religious activities. Given this, I wonder whether visiting other faiths' places of worship or celebrating their festivals is the most effective way of addressing intolerance or inter-group tension. Is it true that religious beliefs are at the core of intolerance and racism? This is the assumption on which inter-faith dialogue is founded.

Many, if not most, inter-faith projects are targeted at young people and school communities. However, young people are even less likely to be religious than the

general population. The 2001 Census showed that 18-24 year olds were less likely to have a religious affiliation than any other age group (ABS, 2004). The ABS 2002 General Social Survey showed that among 18-24 year olds, only 23 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men had participated in church or religious activities in the three months prior to interview (ABS, 2004).

Yet inter-faith activities typically involve people exploring in some detail the theological principles of each faith. For example, on the website of the National Council of Churches in Australia, there is a summary of the activities of the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews:

During 2003 the group examined key concepts in each religion which have led to misunderstanding and tension. The Muslim community discussed Jihad, the Jewish community Zionism, and the Christian community Trinity (NCCA, 2006).

But are the concepts of Jihad, Zionism and Trinity really at the core of inter-group tension? I can understand that perhaps Muslims may feel more accepted in the national community if there is greater understanding of the complexities of the meaning of jihad. I can see that perhaps an open and frank discussion of the concept of Zionism might clear some air between Jews and Muslims.

However, these sorts of activities assume that misunderstanding of theology is what causes conflict. This assumes that people are a lot more engaged with religion than they actually are. Think about the hostility towards Muslim and Arab-Australians in today's society. Firstly in popular discussions, there is often a conflation of Arab, Lebanese and Muslim – all of these identities are often rolled into one big nasty unAustralian character. In the tabloids, on talk-back radio, people do not even distinguish between religion and ethnicity. Often the word 'Lebanese' is a code for 'Muslim', even though the majority of Australian Lebanese people are Christian.

The hostility expressed by some Muslims in Australia is not directed at Christianity as such, but in fact, often at the abstract concept of 'Western society' which is seen as 'godless'. Think about the comments by some imams who have blamed 'Western culture' for being immoral. It is not Christianity they are objecting to – in fact, they probably have very few problems with Christianity as such. They object to things like sexual freedom, to women dressing as they choose – things that are born out of 'godlessness' and 'immorality', not Christianity. So how will understanding the Trinity help to improve their relations with mainstream society?

Religious misunderstanding does not seem to be at the heart of intolerance in Australia. People's hostility towards others does not seem to stem from a lack of religious knowledge. So, inter-faith dialogue over-elevates people's religious identities. It restricts discussion to religion when people's identities and values are much broader. Why is there so much official support for activities that force people to participate through a religious identity?

To return to my personal experience of this... When I go to meetings generally framed as being about racism or multiculturalism, I feel like I can make a contribution. I don't go as a representative of any community. Although I have a Chinese background, I am not there to represent the Chinese community, and people



do not generally expect me to articulate a 'Chinese' perspective on issues. I feel like I can go along as just someone committed to fighting racism. My identity is not prescribed.

When an event is framed in terms of inter-faith, however, I have no place. I am not there to represent any faith, because I don't have any religious faith. But neither am I there to represent atheism. I might be an atheist, but that is not the identity I want to wear to discuss issues of racism and intolerance. I don't see how my personal beliefs about the transcendental are at all relevant. Most inter-faith events have no room for non-believers anyway. What does this mean for how community work around multicultural issues is done in Australia? Does it mean that migrant community projects increasingly come with a prescriptive element in that they stipulate a particular identity to anyone who wants to participate?

### **Conclusion: De-politicising community relations**

The rise of inter-faith dialogue de-politicises community relations. The dialogue approach essentially views cross-cultural interaction through a liberal pluralist model, with its assumption that racism is a product of individual prejudice and misunderstanding that can be addressed through dialogue. Simply getting together different groups of people and encouraging dialogue assumes the existence of a level playing field, neglecting the inequalities in privilege and power that inevitably exist. Researchers working on anti-racist education have long warned of 'the embedded power relations and the parasitic nature of dialogue in antiracism workshops' (Dei, 1996, p. 262).

The 'harmony' framework in general deliberately sidelines the concept of racism (the word has gradually slipped out of use in the official Living in Harmony documents), instead individualising social relations and discouraging participants from looking at broader structural issues of equity, power, representation and systemic change, including questions of how institutions should respond to the challenges of diversity and difference.

Not only does the 'harmony' approach not examine questions of inequality and power, but it may in fact consolidate existing inequalities. A long-standing problem of Australian multiculturalism is its assumption that society comprises naturally unified ethnic communities, who each have a 'culture' to maintain and issues to advocate. Governments have institutionalised this conception by funding and consulting with particular ethnic organisations that are assumed to represent their community. This is a very essentialist way of looking at communities, and one that has traditionally consolidated the power of the already powerful people within communities, usually wealthy, conservative men, while marginalising others like women and young people, and generally denying the diversity that exists within any community.

With the rise of the inter-faith framework, will this essentialising tendency be even stronger? If people are seen as part of distinct faith groups, and only participate in

Australian society through their religious identity, will this again strengthen the power of conservative religious leaders and organisations in migrant communities? Whose voices will be marginalised in the process? More research is needed to investigate empirical and conceptual implications of the desecularisation of Australian multiculturalism. With the rise of inter-faith activities, what other kinds of community activities are sidelined?

Overall, the growing official support for inter-faith dialogue is obviously a part of the Howard Government's neo-conservative agenda. As in other parts of the world, religion in Australia is being increasingly welcomed into public policy and discourse, as is evident from the contracting out of welfare services to religious organisations, to the deployment of the language of 'values' in public discourse. In most instances, this shift is part of governmental efforts to expand the presence of Christianity in public life, whether through public discourse or in service delivery. In the realm of community relations, the picture is more complex, as Muslims, Jews, and occasionally other non-Christian groups, also find themselves recipients of governmental largesse. However, the inter-faith dialogue framework contributes similarly to the overall neo-conservative agenda by removing the conceptual tools, for example, the concept of racism, to challenge the status quo.

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