

## Living beyond Fear: Dialogue and the Common Good

The season of Ramadan has become a season for fresh engagements among people of different faiths and sections of the community. I think it is most appropriate that a season dedicated to prayer and fasting turns us away from our own self-preoccupations towards one another. This Iftar meal is a good example of such an open spirit. This is the spirit we so desperately need today. It is a privilege for this Centre to work with Bluestar to foster a new dialogue.

Last year at the national Anglican general synod in Adelaide I proposed a motion calling for a renewed dialogue in the Anglican Church. For much of our life we are caught in debates. The problem with debate is that it assumes an established position. 'Debate' has its origins in two Latin words that mean 'apart or against each other' and 'to fight, or beat'. Federal Parliament shows us what debate can look like. Debate quickly becomes a contest and an attempt to persuade others to accept; or at least to win the argument regardless of winning hearts and minds. I noted that in our church life, and society more generally we seemed addicted to debate.

Is there another way? What about discussion? Discussion is important. Yet discussion still retains a combative element. The word 'discussion' comes from a Latin word which means to "to smash apart." The same root word gives us "concussion" and "percussion". When we hear the words, 'We need to discuss this'; beware. This can be the opening salvo in many a bitter battle.

The third and least used option is dialogue. 'Dialogue' comes from Greek words meaning 'through' and 'the word'. Physicist David Bohm suggests the original meaning of dialogue was "passing or moving through . . . a free flow of meaning between people in the sense of a stream that flows between two banks."

In my speech to the synod I proposed – somewhat idealistically – that life would work much better for all if we reversed the process – that we began with dialogue, then moved from dialogue to discussion and perhaps then to debate. Certainly it would make our religious, political and public debates more informed. In times of uncertainty when many things are changing so quickly it is almost impossible to have clear and firm positions. The ground upon which we stand no longer feels secure. And because we crave certainty we claim the high ground, and promote our case and fail to listen.

However the deeper reality is that if there is fresh wisdom to be found it will only emerge through a new dialogue. You know you are in dialogue with another person when there is a spirit of openness to one another and a humble recognition that no one has all the answers neatly packaged and ready to deliver to the world.

I recall the comments of a theologian I once read who stated the matter thus:

There are questions that require answers  
There are problems that require solutions  
And there are mysteries that one can only probe

Too much of our life is preoccupied with questions and problems. Not enough time and energy is given to the deeper matters of our life together on this planet. Probing the mysteries of human existence and finding a common wisdom for the common good – this requires patience and engagement in a spirit of hospitality across religions of the world and between countries.

In September this year this Centre (with assistance from the Australian Government) will host a Muslim/Christian national dialogue. It will take place in our capital and regional cities. A high level conversation will take place in the public square. It will involve my predecessor, Rev'd Professor James Haire AC and Professor Azyumardi Azra. Professor Azra is one of the most prominent Muslim academic scholars and public intellectuals in Indonesia. He is also a longstanding friend of Professor Haire. We believe this is an important and timely dialogue and we hope it might offer a positive example of how people of different faiths and cultures grow together in understanding and appreciation of one another.

On Monday I was involved in a Press Conference with the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change to respond to Pope Francis' *Encyclical* on the Environment. We gathered at Parliament House: Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus. The Encyclical reminds us that the earth is our common home; that we share a common humanity and that we have to face the challenges with a common vision. The Grand Mufti of Australia Ibrahim Abu Mohammed endorsed the Pope's call for action when he stated 'Protecting the environment is a moral imperative and not acting to address this problem is a form of moral pollution'. The Pope is inviting all people into a fresh dialogue to find a fresh wisdom. The thing about dialogue is that it implies a two-way communication and mutual

listening and response. Dialogue assumes that we have something to learn from others. Dialogue is more resistant to political spin; indeed it unmasks it. Dialogue occurs when we acknowledge our limitations; it occurs when we choose to live beyond our fears. Fear closes down dialogue and fear is rampant today.

The American Philosopher Martha Nussbaum refers to fear as ‘the emotion of narcissism’. She notes that fear is ‘primitive’ being connected to primitive brain processes which humans share with other animals. Of course fear is valuable and often accurate when it comes to survival but the problem is that fear’s view of the world is too narrow. Unlike grief or sympathy or compassion fear is an emotion that systematically screens out the full reality and genuine worth of other people. Fear is invariably fixated on the self and what threatens the self. As a consequence ‘episodic fear and anxiety, or chronic fear, are simply more narcissistic than other emotions .... It threatens or prevents love’.<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum concludes: ‘Fear is a “dimming preoccupation”: an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness’.<sup>2</sup> However valuable and indeed essential it is in a genuinely dangerous world, fear is ironically ‘one of life’s great dangers’.

How best to address the climate of fear today? Within a pluralistic cultural and religious environment shaped by shared goals and ideals there are a number of vital elements that need to be continually remembered, fostered and practiced.

- (a) First, good principles that focus on the good of others and the greater common good. Good principles include equality and dignity of all persons, respect for conscience, fairness and accommodation to minorities.
- (b) Second, we need ethical consistency. We are notoriously poor in this area of life personally, socially and politically. Inconsistency, following Socrates, is the sign of an unexamined life. This is relevant to the personal, social and political aspects of society.
- (c) Third, to make good principles and stick to them consistently we need to develop our ‘inner eyes’. This has everything to do with the cultivation of a sympathetic imagination. Thus we need to cultivate ‘a spirit of curiosity, openness and sympathy, and a generosity to our neighbours that extends beyond our own self-concern.’<sup>3</sup> In this case the majority never say ‘I’m the norm, now you fit in’. Rather it says, ‘I

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<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p..57.

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p..57.

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.96.

respect you as an equal, and I know that my own religious pursuits are not the only ones around. Even if I am more numerous and hence more powerful, I will try to make the world comfortable for you'. This is the spirit of a gracious host. And the key here is, says Nussbaum, a 'good hostess needs a good imagination'. The empathetic imagination 'moves in a direction opposite to fear....In empathy the mind moves outward, occupying many different positions outside of itself.'<sup>4</sup>

These three elements: good principles, ethical consistency and a sympathetic imagination are far more than an enlightened secular philosophy. They have their roots in the ethical and moral visions of the religious traditions of the world. These traditions represent powerful antidotes to the fear and anxiety of the age that consistently defaults to narrow and stunted visions and leaves people unsatisfied and spiritually hungry. The religious traditions of the world, in various ways, embody ideals and intentions for a kind of social holiness i.e. ideals that seek the wellbeing of civil society. Tonight we are grateful to our Muslim friends for the season of Ramadan. Their hospitality offers us all the opportunity to find a deeper bond of friendship, a renewed strength to overcome fear with compassion, a new resolve to seek the wisdom from above for our common life upon earth, for a sympathetic imagination and recovery of gratitude for one another.

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<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.146.