

## **The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Promoting and Sustaining Social Cohesion: Four Theses<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. In a time of uncertainty concerning the nature and possibility of social cohesion interfaith dialogue has an important contribution to make**

Amidst the many puzzles and challenges of contemporary life, one of the more significant and illusive concerns the question of human society. It is not simply a question about whether human society is possible in a deeply fragmented and violent world, though that matter haunts us. Nor is it simply a concern about what kind of society is optimal and makes for human well-being. Though, of course, the search for exactly such a society remains a hope and desire for many, particularly those of the world for whom daily life is a grind and without hope. Such concerns belong to the human project across cultures races and languages. The search for viable, sustaining human society, which enhances the quality of life and contributes to the well being of civil society belongs to the deepest aspirations of the diverse religious traditions of contemporary Australia. How these religious traditions and the interfaith dialogue they foster might contribute to a stronger social cohesion is a critical matter. But there are some prior questions e.g. What holds human society together? What are the conditions required for human society? And what clues might the religious traditions of Australia be able to offer to these questions. These are questions about the possibility of human society; the optimal kind of society; questions about human flourishing and questions about how society might be repaired and improved. These are the questions which underlie so much of contemporary life in Australia. Interfaith dialogue is situated within this larger set of questions regarding civil society today.

The gremlin in the system is that we no longer seem to have any confidence about what might justify true human society. This is a question about the foundations of human society. Moreover, we are unsure how to develop an understanding of the conditions necessary to justify true society. Nor does it seem are we clear, from a religious point of view, how human society might be related to God. In the modern western world, the question about what justifies a true society is answered principally by reference to a utilitarian philosophy based on a pragmatic assessment of what works best to maximize economic well-being of individuals. This seems to have achieved a god-like status in the minds and hearts of people. This approach underpins a competitive market

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<sup>1</sup> A paper prepared for the Multicultural Council of Australia, Roundtable, Melbourne, 21 May, 2014. The brief for this occasion was ‘interfaith dialogue for social cohesion’. However a prior issue concerns the relationship between the idea of ‘social cohesion’, ‘social inclusion’ the nature of civil society in Australia. How interfaith dialogue contributes to a healthier civil society is the broader horizon for interfaith dialogue.

economy which functions according to Darwinian notions of natural selection where the most powerful and intelligent survive. Welfare and government restraint attempts to keep the system in check to some extent but in other ways end up unintentionally colluding with the dominant market forces. Within such a framework, society receives its own justification based on the usefulness of its constituent parts (including people) for the maximizing of efficient production and exchange of goods. The end result is that human society and its flourishing is interpreted in terms of economic value.

In the last quarter of a century, we have become more aware than ever that a utilitarian approach to social cohesion does not and cannot do justice to the nature of the social bond. Environmental concerns, and recognition that our lives are inextricably woven into the fabric of the planet and indeed the cosmos, have reminded us that we are deeply connected with each other on the earth. This is a condition of our being as such prior to any consideration of usefulness or serving the interests of society, its organizations and institutions. Indeed, few things can be more fundamental to our life than our interconnectedness with others and the world. From this point of view, it is no accident that the appeal to community has become almost stock in trade as an aspirational value for our life together. Importantly from this perspective the religious traditions of Australia are community traditions i.e. their religious practices and rituals, beliefs, social/political engagements. Those who inhabit such traditions draw upon vast resources through time and across cultures that mean they carry within their practices and intellectual engagements significant stores of wisdom about what makes communities tick, what makes for best practice and what dangers ought to be avoided. It is axiomatic that such traditions have much to contribute to the character and dynamic of social cohesion.

## **2. Interfaith dialogue occurs today in a global environment of fear and anxiety**

The peoples of Australia are bound together by shared goals and ideals ‘in a way that does not require homogeneity-in dress, dietary custom, religious belief, or even outward religious observance’.<sup>2</sup> USA, Canada, New Zealand India are other examples. This is different from European traditions which for historical reasons have their identities shaped around particular racial, ethnic and cultural lines.<sup>3</sup> Moreover the great majority of the peoples of Australia are descendants

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<sup>2</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012, p.18.

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.13, notes that ‘Ever since the rise of the modern nation state, European nations have understood the root of nationhood to lie first and foremost in characteristics that are difficult if not impossible for new immigrants to share.

of immigrants albeit in a land of ancient people who travelled here 40,000 thousand years ago. Because of the particular make up of the peoples of Australia we are a remarkably pluralistic society with regard to race, cultures, languages and religions – particularly from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recognizing, acknowledging and appreciating the diversity and fundamental equality of all peoples of Australia are critical components of our shared goals and ideals. This has made even more urgent and important reconciliation with the first Australians. We often take our shared goals and values for granted; a bit like the air we breathe which does not cause us to reflect very hard until an issue – like Asylum Seekers and Refugees – prompts us to reconsider our most cherished values.

However the cultural and religious diversity of a nation like Australia does not inoculate it from the anxieties and fears of our times. It does not mean that people ‘do not fear the strange and different, or associate religious minorities with danger. It does mean that there is a powerful counterweight’.<sup>4</sup> 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 and/or when life is under threat. But 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. Moreover when fear is socialized observes Nussbaum, it ‘is always relentlessly focused on the self and the safety of the self’.<sup>5</sup> Fear is fixated on the self and what threatens the self and as a consequence ‘episodic fear and anxiety, or chronic fear, are simply more narcissistic than other emotions .... It threatens or prevents love’.<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum concludes: ‘Fear is a “dimming preoccupation”: an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness. However valuable and indeed essential it is in a genuinely dangerous world, it is one of life’s great dangers’.<sup>7</sup>

Nussbaum’s discussion of fear and anxiety is developed in the context of what she terms the ‘new religious intolerance’ – which unfortunately is not difficult to identify and track around the globe. It is associated with what one writer

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Strongly influenced by romanticism, these nations have seen blood, soil, ethnolinguistic peoplehood, and religion as necessary or at least central elements of a national identity. Thus people who have a different geographical origin, or a different holy land, or a different mother tongue, or a different appearance and way of dressing, never quite seem to belong, however long they have resided in a country’.

<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.18.

<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.56.

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p..57.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p..57.

refers to as the ‘securitization’ of religion.<sup>8</sup> Thus the securitization of religion ‘entails rhetorically constructing religion as a direct security threat to the state and presenting it as an issue of supreme priority that needs to be dealt with outside the normal legal and political processes upon which religion is dealt with’.<sup>9</sup> This may seem a good distance from current Australian experience though we ought not be naive about the fact that there is a powerful secular philosophy that carries strong popular appeal in the West. This approach regards religion as responsible for, or at least the underlying reason for much of the violence of the world. But of course as one person deeply involved in interfaith dialogue has remarked ‘religions aren’t violent human beings are’. Though the idea of ‘religion as threat’ is regularly given credence through media today. This view trades on the narcissism of fear and anxiety. Social cohesion through fear and anxiety runs counter to true community and a healthy civil society. Interfaith dialogue has much to offer in this respect.

### **3. Interfaith dialogue offers a rich resource as an alternative to fear and anxiety**

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 which 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>10</sup> In this case the majority never say ‘I’m the norm, now you fit in’. Rather it says, ‘I respect you as an equal, and I know that my own religious pursuits are not the only ones

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<sup>8</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p.35. This means that ‘an issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure’

<sup>9</sup> Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, p.35

<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.96.

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 hostess'. 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>11</sup>

These three elements: good principles, ethical consistency and a sympathetic imagination belong not just to an enlightened secular philosophy. In different and interesting ways they can be found embedded in the religious traditions of the world. They belong to religious cultures with long histories of engagement with the transcendent dimensions of life. Moreover they embody forms of life that are orientated towards the Holy and this means religious traditions offer ways of living holy and fruitful lives on this planet. 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. These traditions of holiness are world embracing rather than preoccupied with the individual. They are affirming of the wholeness and whole of society rather than merely sectional interests. They invariably have the common good as the horizon of their aspirations and hopes. They are generally not escapist looking to another world but at their best espouse practices that embody God's holy presence in the relationships, networks, institutions and challenges before us.

#### **4. Interfaith dialogue provides an avenue for building trust and friendship for the strengthening of civil society**

Interfaith dialogue is a counter to fear and anxiety because it opens up the pathway for the renewal of trust and deepening of friendship across difference and diversity within civil society. Whenever people of different faith traditions meet for the purposes of greater understanding they are making an intentional decision to open themselves to each other. This involves a certain vulnerability and recognition that following the exchange things will be different. One reason for this is that the process of interfaith dialogue tests participants regarding their willingness and capacity for self-critique. The questions on the table revolve around: how does my religious tradition enhance each and every other tradition's capacity for self-critique? The words of Jesus are challenging in this regard: 'Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own'? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend let

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<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.146.

me take the speck out of your eye', when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? (Luke's Gospel 6:41-42).

Interfaith dialogue invariably opens up the questions to do with difference and diversity. Here again a certain natural vulnerability is required of participants so that they together can grow in understanding and appreciation of both commonalities and differences. At the heart of this work is the challenge of valuing our diversities.

As religious traditions come up close and personal; desire to listen to one another across differences; as they accept the natural vulnerabilities that attend to such an exercise; as they learn the costly art of self critique through such a process then something fundamental occurs; so fundamental that without it human community disintegrates and social cohesion is simply a fantasy. I am referring here to friendship - personal, civic, political religious. This entails curiosity, listening, responsiveness; trying to see the situation from the point of view of my neighbour; striving to go beyond the narcissism of fear and anxiety. Through friendship we are enabled to see the other who is different as a full human being; the other religious tradition as incorporating a long tradition of holiness and moral traditions that have served communities well.

The concept of friendship has a long pedigree. For Aristotle friendship was the means by which people attained virtue and lived well with others. Moreover for Aristotle if the state fails to achieve a good ordering for the welfare and maturation of its citizens this task could at least be achieved through friendship. Importantly however for Aristotle the appeal to friendship did not mean abandonment of the good ordering of society through the state; rather he regarded friendship as the seed of a renewed civil society.<sup>12</sup> In the fragmented and often confused modern political ordering of society it may be that friendship becomes once again the ideal and aspiration that can provide the seed bed for social cohesion. It is precisely in this context that interfaith dialogue can become a key element in nurturing friendship in a liberal democracy like Australia. Just as importantly interfaith dialogue offers a window for others into the process by which true friendship across diversity and difference might actually be achieved. This is never a simple or easy task. There is in fact no cheap friendship. Patient and attentive interfaith engagement will most certainly reveal the true cost of friendship and offer a seed of hope for a more sustainable social cohesion and healthier and vibrant civil society.

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship and Christian Theology*, Oxford: OUP, 2011, p. 113.

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