

Interfaith Dialogue: The Australian Catholic Scene

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Abstract: *Interfaith (or interreligious) dialogue is now recognisably an important aspect of human life in our globalised world. Its poignancy is made evident by a number of challenges that define our modern world. Although Christian dialogue with other traditions has a mixed history, its origins in the ministry of Jesus and the early centuries of the church are important to highlight. So, too, we need to acknowledge the failures of the past. The Catholic Church's recommitment to dialogue since Vatican II is unequivocal in official church teaching as well as in the promotion of dialogue through the establishment of interfaith commissions at international, national and diocesan levels. In the Australian situation we can also recognise many initiatives at local and national levels sponsored by governments, universities, community, religious and intercultural groups. The question of being Australian and Catholic is raised with respect to the mutual influences of religion and culture in interfaith attitudes and approaches.*

Key Words: interfaith dialogue; interreligious; ecumenism; Indigenous; Second Vatican Council; Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue; Parliament of World Religions; reconciliation

PREAMBLE

The term *interfaith dialogue* may be relatively new and, in the minds of some, not the best term to describe the positive interaction between people of various religious, spiritual and cultural traditions. However, rather than get ourselves hijacked over the best choice of words, we need to acknowledge some fundamental realities. The first is that cultures, societies and religions have evolved in relationship with—and, too often, conflict between—one another. The second is that, even in the darkest moments of religious and cultural conflict, there are outstanding examples of individuals who stood against the tide of hatred, division and intolerance. Throughout history, there are also examples of entire multi-religious societies living in relative harmony and peace, sometimes for centuries. At some level, interfaith dialogue has always been with us—even if it was sometimes looked upon with suspicion.

The third reality is this: we now find ourselves at a new juncture in human history. Social historians note the final century of the second millennium was the most bloody in the history of human life. Wars, gulags and genocides fuelled by warped ideologies and despotic dictatorships, assisted by the new technologies of war, resulted in the death of some two billion human beings. The vast majority of these war victims were civilians.¹ Nor can it be denied that religion played its role: often in its inability to stem the tide of violence and destruction that overtook entire nations and continents; sometimes through

¹ The euphemism for this mass-murdering of civilians is 'collateral damage'.

the direct inflammation of national and ethnic hatreds in the very name of religion. Of course, this is not the whole story of twentieth century life or religion.

But it raises many questions about the manner in which peoples, nations, cultures and religions need to interact in our 'globalised' world of the third millennium. To paraphrase the oft-quoted words of Catholic theologian Hans Küng: 'No peace on earth without peace among the nations; and no peace among the nations without dialogue among the religions'.² Second, to heed the words of interfaith scholar Raimon Panikkar, we stand on the brink of a new wave of interaction among the religions of the world. In reality, all religions claim to be "ways of peace".³ The task of the religious traditions is to reclaim the depths of their own spiritual wisdom in a new spirit of openness and respect for other traditions. Together through a process of "cross-fertilization and mutual fecundation" we may find the "way of peace" for a broken world.⁴ We turn our attention now to the challenges, practices and promises of interfaith dialogue from Christian, Catholic and Australian perspectives.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

We should not think Christian dialogue with other traditions is an entirely new phenomenon. Jesus himself is presented in the Gospels as a person who engages with the foreigner and stranger in a fully respectful spirit. One thinks of his dialogue with the multi-married Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-26) or his encounter with the Canaanite (Syro-Phoenician) woman (Mk 7:25-30). When Jesus praises the Roman centurion for his faith (Lk 7:1-10), tells the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25-37) and heals the ten lepers (Lk 17: 11-19), he unequivocally and publicly recognises the higher virtue of some non-Jewish people. So, the beginning of Christian involvement in interfaith dialogue goes back to Jesus himself.

Moreover, the church's foundations are unthinkable outside of the Jewish faith from which it emerged. Soon enough, it found itself in dialogue with Greek, Roman and other Mediterranean peoples who espoused diverse religious systems. St Paul in particular engages in discourse with the people of Athens in which he explicitly praises their religious spirit (Acts 17: 16-34). In the early centuries, Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, speak of the Word, Wisdom and Spirit of God present in creation, the words of prophets and wisdom-writers, and 'among the nations'. Such attitudes clearly demonstrate the early church's openness towards the religious other.

While we can associate the hardening of attitudes with Constantine's establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the empire in the fourth century, and the clash with Islam in the eighth, interfaith dialogue did not become extinct. As a minority movement within the Middle East, Africa and Asia, Christians had no alternative but to continue more

² Repeated by Hans Küng in his address at Parliament of World Religions, Melbourne, 6th December 2009.

³ Words signifying 'peace' are central to all religious traditions, for example: 'shalom' (Judaism); 'shanti' (Hinduism); 'salam' (Islam), 'ayudha' (Buddhism), 'pax Christi' [peace of Christ] (Christianity).

⁴ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 61f.

open and dialogical strategies.⁵ In Christian majority Europe, medieval mystics and scholars like Hildegard of Bingen, Raymond Lull, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhard and Francis of Assisi engaged in positive dialogue with Muslims and Jews. Nicholas of Cusa espoused what he called a harmony or concordance of religions.⁶ One also thinks of medieval southern Spain where the three Abrahamic traditions co-exist relatively peacefully under Islamic rule for several centuries.⁷

Three historic events were particularly detrimental to interfaith dialogue. The first was the European perception of increasing Islamic imperialism and the military response known as the Crusades. The second was the European Reformation which not only split the Christian world apart, but encouraged a defensive spirit and negative attitude toward any other religion than one's own. We recall that, more than any other, this was the age in which 'heretics' were burnt at the stake.⁸ The third was the rise of European power which encouraged a colonizing spirit in political, cultural and religious terms. At best, non-European cultures and traditions were considered exotic, inferior and temporary. If there was a place for dialogue, its role was defined in terms of "preparation for the Gospel": in other words, dialogue was seen purely as a strategy for conversion.

We have already noted how events of the twentieth century profoundly challenged the ways in which religions, cultures, nations and peoples interact. Our world is confronted by a whole new set of circumstances: population explosion; post-colonial independence movements; the greatest mass movement of people in human history; communication and technological revolutions; secularization; globalization; a new wave of religious fundamentalisms; global warming, sea-rise and other ecological warnings. Added to this is the call for reconciliation among the traditions including the need to acknowledge responsibility for past mistreatment of peoples, be it in the name of religion, ethnicity or ideology. This is evidently a task of special importance for the churches in light of the history of Christian attitudes and behaviour toward Jewish and Indigenous peoples, to mention two.⁹

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church began the process of reassessing its role, mission and engagement with other peoples in a formal way with Pope John XXIII's calling of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In essence, it represented the call to move from a ghetto-church to a church that engages in more positive and open fashion with the world's peoples, cultures

⁵ For this most interesting and generally little known experience of Christian history, see Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

⁶ See Nicholas of Cusa, *Writings on Church and Reform*, trans. Thomas M. Izbicki (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁷ See, for example, Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Christians and Jews created a culture of tolerance in Medieval Spain* (NY: Little, Brown & Co., 2002).

⁸ While one may have well defined and seemingly justifiable reasons to call another a 'heretic', in political terms 'heretic' simply means somebody who does not believe the same things I do. None of this is to suggest that denouncement and murder in the name of king, tribe, empire or religion was especially new; but the emphasis on heretical-creedal belief as the basis for losing one's head reached new proportions in the inter-Christian religious wars in the aftermath of the Reformation.

⁹ Among other Christian leaders, Pope John Paul II showed significant leadership in regard to expressing sorrow to Jews, Indigenous peoples and others.

and religions. Rather than seeing the (graced) church and (sinful) world in such an antithetical manner, there is official recognition that truth, grace and goodness are to be found in the whole of creation, specifically in other religious traditions.¹⁰ We recall that such views represent a return to the teachings of Jesus, the apostles and apologists of the early church. As well, the Council teaches that the church's divine foundation in Christ does not make it immune from sin: the church is sinful and holy at the same time.¹¹

If there is a single word that provides a metaphor for the change of attitude, that word is *dialogue*. To quote from the Vatican Council, Catholics are now called to "enter with prudence and charity into dialogue and collaboration with members of other religions".¹² Among reasons the Vatican Council gives for "dialogue and collaboration" with other religious believers are the overcoming of divisions, growth in mutual understanding and the general promotion of peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.¹³ In his very first encyclical, Pope Paul VI highlights the importance of dialogue with all peoples and religions as central to the church's program of renewal.¹⁴

At the formal level, the Catholic Church responded to the new situation by establishing the *Secretariat for Non-Christians* (1964), later renamed the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (1988). A specific *Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews* was established in 1974.¹⁵ Various other pontifical commissions dealing with the Church's relations with Muslims, Indigenous and other peoples and religions are integral to, and work in cooperation with, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.¹⁶ The most significant theological development of recent decades is the recognition that interreligious dialogue is an essential aspect of the Church's evangelizing mission.¹⁷ Moreover, while proclamation retains a certain priority, it neither replaces nor

¹⁰ The Vatican Documents affirm that other religious traditions contain "elements which are true and good", "precious things both religious and human", "elements of truth and grace", "seeds of the Word" and "rays of that truth which illumines all humankind". *Lumen Gentium*: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, hereafter LG; *Gaudium et Spes*: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, hereafter GS; *Ad Gentes*: The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, hereafter AG; *Nostra Aetate*: The Declaration on the Church's Relations with non-Christian Religions, hereafter NA. See LG, 16; GS, 92; AG, 9, 11, 15; NA, 2 in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1975).

¹¹ This recognition is captured in the classical Latin formula, *ecclesia semper reformanda* [church always in need of reform]. It is in this spirit that Pope John XXIII called the Vatican Council, in his word, for the church's *aggiornamento* [renewal or, literally, 'bringing up to date'].

¹² NA, 2. Here the Latin '*colloquia*' is translated as 'dialogue' rather than Flannery's 'discussion'.

¹³ NA, 3. Another reason for dialogue is given in the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* which encourages missionaries to "learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations". AG, 11.

¹⁴ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964). See website (accessed 01/05/10):

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html

¹⁵ The need to establish a particular Commission in relation to the Jewish people [CRJ] is evident in view of the unfortunate history of Christian-Jewish relations culminating in the horrors of the Holocaust. This Commission operates within—or at least reports to—the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity* [PCPU].

¹⁶ PCID has had a somewhat chequered history especially during the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI when it was demoted to a *Commission within the Pontifical Council for Culture* [PCC] (2006). However, the following year, perhaps in response to straining relations with the Muslim world following Pope Benedict's Regensburg Address, it was again upgraded as an independent Pontifical Council.

¹⁷ This is clearly stated by: *Secretariat for Non-Christians, 'Dialogue and Mission'* (1984) [DM, 13]; Pope John Paul II's Address to the Secretariat (1987) and his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) [RM, 55]; *Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelization, 'Dialogue and Proclamation'* (1991) [DP 6, 55]; See Francesco Gioia, ed., *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church 1963-1995* (Boston:

overshadows the importance of dialogue as an authentic and necessary expression of Christian mission in its own right.¹⁸

The 1991 document *Dialogue and Proclamation* states unequivocally that 'all Christians are called to dialogue'.¹⁹ The rationale for such dialogue builds on those provided by the Council and now includes: learning about the positive value of other traditions; overcoming prejudice; purifying cultures of dehumanizing elements; upholding traditional cultural values of Indigenous peoples; and purifying their own faith.²⁰ Clearly, the Catholic Church has moved decisively from a paradigm of comparative isolation to one of encounter with the world's religious traditions.²¹ Moreover, that encounter or call to interreligious dialogue is considered integral to Christian life and mission. To put the matter more rhetorically, for a Catholic to ignore, let alone deny, the importance of religious dialogue is out of line with the church's official teaching; to fail to involve oneself in such dialogue at some level is to impede the church's missionary effectiveness.

THE AUSTRALIAN / CATHOLIC INTERFAITH SCENE

The importance of religious dialogue is formally recognised by the National Catholic Bishops' Conference through the work of the Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations. As a member of the National Council of Churches of Australia, the Bishops' Conference is also represented on such bodies as the Australian Council of Christians and Jews and the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews.²² Many of these commissions, councils and dialogues also operate at state and regional levels: metropolitan dioceses, for example have their own Commissions for Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations. There are also Catholic national and diocesan committees or task-forces whose responsibility is to engage in dialogue with specific traditions and religious groups.

Pauline Books & Media, 1994). This teaching is also affirmed in the theologically cautious Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Dominus Iesus' (2000) [DI, 22]. See [accessed 5/5/2010]: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

¹⁸ The 1984 document on *Dialogue and Mission* describes the evangelising mission of the Church as a "single but complex and articulated reality" embracing the following elements: presence and witness; social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; proclamation and catechesis. The document explains that "the totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements" (DM, 13). John Paul II later reinforces the view that "interreligious dialogue is one element in the mission of the Church" by stressing the complementarity of dialogue and proclamation: "There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring and rejecting the other" (1987 Papal Address to the Secretariat, cit. DP, 6). Nonetheless, the various elements of Christian mission are not considered equal since the culmination of mission remains the proclamation of the Gospel (DM, 34). Consequently, interreligious dialogue is now recognised as an integral but subsidiary activity of the evangelising mission of the Church.

¹⁹ The precise wording of the official English translation states: "All local Churches, and all the members of these Churches, are called to dialogue", DP, 43.

²⁰ DP, 43-49.

²¹ An accessible account of the Catholic church's movement from isolation to encounter is provided by Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations across the Traditions* (New York & Oxford: Sheed & Ward, 2004).

²² The *Australian Council of Christians and Jews* was inaugurated in 1991 as an extension of pre-existing state and regional bodies. The *Australian Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews* was established in 2003 in association with the *Australian Federation of Islamic Councils* and *Executive Council of Australian Jewry*. See (accessed 01/05/10): <http://www.ccjaustralia.org/en/>; <http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/interfaith>

Many other Catholic agencies—Catholic Religious Australia, Australian Commission for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, Sancta Sophia Meditation Community, Janssen Spirituality Centre for Inter-religious and Cross-cultural Relations, Asia-Pacific Centre for Interreligious Dialogue—are at the forefront in the promotion of interfaith dialogue.²³ One particular interfaith fellowship initiative provides scholarships for young Australian Catholic women to be formed as leaders in interfaith dialogue.²⁴

Moreover, there are many other initiatives at national, state and grass-roots levels which mark Australia out as a place with considerable energy in the interfaith movement. All this reflects the multi-cultural and multi-religious nature of our society. It is also a way of giving a counter-voice to the those expressions of racist or xenophobic views raised in association with the Cronulla riots, attacks on Indian students and other unseemly events in the nation's recent history. The increased number of refugee arrivals and the current debate on immigration – both issues of legitimate national and political concern – also indicate the need for ongoing initiatives to encourage tolerance and understanding among cultural, ethnic and religious traditions.

In other words, the involvement of Australian Catholics in the interfaith movement needs to be seen in the broader context of Australian society. It is not without significance that Melbourne was chosen as the city to host the Parliament of World Religions in December 2009.²⁵ This event took as its theme “Hearing each other; healing the earth”. Unquestionably, this was the largest interreligious gathering in Australian history numbering more than 4,000 attendees and some 250 world ‘religions’. A feature of current interfaith activities is the nature of the support that includes mosques, temples, synagogues, churches, governments at all levels, community and other non-government organisations such as the “Sea of Faith in Australia”, “InterAction: Multifaith Youth Network”, “Women’s Interfaith Network” and “Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations”.²⁶ It is especially the grass-roots level of interfaith networking that is most significant and promising for the future growth of the movement.

Australian universities, long considered the bastion of secular values—and often anti-religious ones—are now increasingly involved in interfaith activities. While some universities concentrate on the study of particular cultural and religious traditions, others now promote centres with explicit focus on interfaith dialogue. Griffith University’s *Multi-Faith Centre*, for example, advocates “interfaith dialogue, education and action” through the promotion of academic research, conferences and other regular gatherings where

²³ Details of interfaith involvements of these various Catholic agencies can be found on their respective websites (accessed 01/05/10): <http://www.catholicreligiousaustralia.org/>; <http://www.monasticdialog.com/>; <http://www.columban.org.au/our-works/christian-muslim-relations/about-cmr/>; <http://www.sanctasophia.org.au/>; <http://www.janssencentre.org/>; <http://www.acu.edu.au/148781>

²⁴ This initiative is supported by the *Commission for Australian Catholic Women* (within the *National Catholic Bishops’ Conference*) with sponsorship from Australian Catholic religious orders. Since 2006, over thirty women have gained their Graduate Certificate in Interfaith Dialogue through Australian Catholic University.

²⁵ See *Parliament of World Religions* website (accessed 01/05/10): <http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/>

²⁶ See respective websites (accessed 01/05/10): <http://www.sof-in-australia.org/>; <http://www.interaction.org.au/>; <http://www.fecca.org.au/interfaith/>; http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/race/2007/apro_forum.html

“people from diverse faith, religious and spirituality traditions” meet.²⁷ Other examples of recent university-sponsored centres with express commitment to interfaith dialogue at scholarly and community levels include La Trobe’s *Centre for Dialogue* and Charles Sturt’s *Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture* as well as Australian Catholic University’s *Asia-Pacific Centre for Interreligious Dialogue*.²⁸

Bridging the scholarly and community levels of interfaith engagement are annual *International Abraham Conferences* in Sydney and Melbourne. While such conferences have a particular focus on interfaith relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims, they also outreach to people of other spiritual traditions. Notable, in this respect, was the 2008 conference, “Walking Together: Our Faiths and Reconciliation,” which included Indigenous, civic and religious speakers.²⁹ Other initiatives stemming from the Christian churches, but outreaching to those of other or no religious faith, include the annual Palm Sunday walks, talks and gatherings for peace and reconciliation. As well, there are now interfaith tours, study groups, breakfast meetings and interreligious services, end of Ramadan dinners (sponsored by the Muslims) and multi-cultural festivals (sponsored by civic and community groups). A search on the internet reveals a surfeit of intercultural and interfaith interest and involvement that is changing the way Australians view their country, heritage and identity.

AUSTRALIAN AND CATHOLIC

Quite evidently, one could provide a much longer list of the many and diverse ways in which Australian Catholics are involved in interfaith dialogue. Given that more than one-in-four Australians (according to the 2006 census) is Catholic, the prominence of many Catholics and Catholic agencies in interfaith activities, and the official church’s commitment to dialogue, we can reasonably assert a positive Catholic influence on Australian interfaith life. Although there is little available data on these issues, we could likewise deduce that Australian cultural attitudes also mould the way Australian Catholics relate to people of minority religious and ethnic groups.

The question that needs to be addressed is to what extent the recent upsurge in more formal interfaith activity has transformed attitudes of the so-called ‘ordinary’ Australian, including the ‘ordinary’ Catholic? Again, it is difficult to obtain data on such an intricate question. Evidently, views on such things as immigration and refugees remain potentially explosive in the Australian electorate. While there is no doubt a relationship between such views and attitudes to the religious, ethnic or cultural other, it does not in itself rule out positive commitment to dialogue with those who are already integrated into Australian society. Australia is, after all, a largely immigrant nation. At one level, it has

²⁷ Griffith University (Brisbane) hosts the Multi-Faith Centre [est. 2002]. See website (accessed 01/05/10): <http://www.griffith.edu.au/community/multi-faith-centre>

²⁸ See websites (accessed 01/05/10): [http://www.latrobe.edu.au/dialogue/;](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/dialogue/) [http://www.csu.edu.au/special/accc/;](http://www.csu.edu.au/special/accc/) <http://www.acu.edu.au/148781>

²⁹ The major sponsors of the International Abraham Conferences are the Islamic-founded *Australian Intercultural Society* and *Affinity Intercultural Foundation* in association with other national religious bodies representing Jewish, Christian (including Catholic) and Muslim faiths. The 7th conference was jointly held at *Australian Catholic University* (Melbourne) and *Sydney University*. Other Abraham conferences and functions have been held at *Griffith, Melbourne* and *La Trobe Universities*.

shown a remarkable ability to open its shores to European, Asian, Oceanian, African and other peoples. On another level, there is the negative history of its treatment of Indigenous peoples and the now discarded “white Australia policy”.³⁰ Australian cultural attitudes and actions always reflect past views and practices (both positive and negative), but they do not stand still.³¹

A related question for Catholics to explore is the extent to which they personally and/or communally are committed to practising interfaith dialogue as an expression of their Christian faith and mission in the world? For example, is interfaith dialogue acknowledged in a practical way at Catholic parish and school level? The picture here seems mixed. Certainly, the educational curriculum now gives much more attention to the study of Indigenous, Asian and other traditions than in the past. There are also attempts to provide formal meetings among school children of diverse religious and cultural groups. At the parish level, with some notable exceptions, there is often inadequate attention paid to the demands of interfaith dialogue. This is of course a more difficult proposition for the many rural parishes throughout Australia where non-Christian religious presence is usually low, sometimes non-existent.

Interestingly, when the Brisbane Catholic Archdiocese held its synod in 2003, interfaith dialogue was not explicitly included in the list of its nine priorities. In some ways this reflected the synod’s focus on processes and procedures to enhance parishes to perform their mission. So, its priorities should not be interpreted as a mission statement in the strict sense. Moreover, there was certainly a commitment to enabling “welcoming and inclusive” parishes, “building a better world”, and involvement in “social justice and social welfare”.³² Such activities, of course, lend themselves to positive engagement and dialogue with those of other traditions. Still, it is interesting that the synod processes did not highlight either ecumenical or interfaith dialogue as a priority—even though these are both strong commitments within the Archdiocese.³³ This leads one to suspect that the church’s teaching and official commitment to interfaith dialogue and activities have yet to be fully integrated at the grass-roots level of church.

CONCLUSION

The Australian Catholic Church has a particular contribution to make in interfaith dialogue from a number of perspectives. The first of these is that the initial Australian Catholic experience, epitomized in the Irish convict, was one of struggle from a minority and oppressed status. That situation continued with Catholic migrants and refugees flooding to this country from Eastern Europe, Asia and other places in the wake of twentieth century

³⁰ See Gwenda Tavan, *The Long, Slow Death of the White Australia Policy* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2005).

³¹ For an excellent analysis of changing attitudes between Muslims and Christians, see Abe W. Ata, *Us and Them: Muslim-Christian Relations and Cultural Harmony in Australia* (Bowen Hills, Qld.: Australian Academic Press, 2009).

³² See Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane Synod (accessed 01/05/10): <http://bne.catholic.net.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=11503>

³³ The Archdiocese’s *Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, for example, has a full-time executive officer and is very active in the promotion of Catholic dialogue with other religions, particularly Judaism, Buddhism and Islam. See website (accessed 01/05/10): <http://bne.catholic.net.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=11649>

wars and dislocation. Today, those who come to our shores are more likely to be Muslims or people of other faith traditions. Our responsibility to show respect and understanding for these people is heightened in view of our own historical experience.

Second, Australian Catholics are fortunate to have a church that is highly committed to interfaith dialogue. Nor is this merely a matter of documents, rhetoric and commissions. For example, a number of Australian bishops are at the forefront of dialogue in practical ways especially with Muslims and Jews.³⁴ Catholic priests, Religious congregations, Indigenous and non-Indigenous laity are highly involved in the work of justice, reconciliation and dialogue with marginalized groups and, in particular, with Australia's Indigenous people.³⁵ These initiatives are generally well supported by church leaders, agencies, parishes, schools and people. The Catholic Church's well established principles of social justice teaching actually lead us to engage with people of multiple faith traditions—and in so doing to engage in interfaith dialogue.

Although ambiguous, I would add to this list of perspectives what is sometimes called our Australian pragmatism. As a people and a church, we might not be all that knowledgeable about principles of interfaith dialogue, but there is an essential Australian attitude that is committed to 'making things work'. As the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society we have become, things will only work for the benefit of all to the extent we 'get along together'. The current energy in the Australian interfaith movement, in both secular and religious guises, is a good omen. Negative aspects of Australian culture will sometimes emerge—but when they do there is good reason for hope. Such hope is not born from an idealistic or vague optimism. It is the hope expressed in the lives of ordinary men and women who make up our nation. It is also a hope being increasingly realised in the commitment of many Australian Catholics to the new understanding that sees interfaith dialogue as an essential part of Christian mission.

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³⁴ For example, Bishop Christopher Prowse (Sale) was a member of the Christian-Muslim pilgrimage to Turkey and Rome in 2009; Bishop Kevin Manning (formerly Parramatta) instigated many dialogues with the Muslim community; Bishop Michael Putney (Townsville) has been at the forefront of Catholic-Jewish relations.

³⁵ The work of reconciliation between Australia's Indigenous and non-Indigenous people needs to be reformulated as an interfaith issue in which the spiritualities of Indigenous traditions are respected on their own terms. See Joan Hendriks and Gerard Hall, "The Natural Mysticism of Indigenous Australian Traditions" in *Australian eJournal of Theology* 13 (2009). This is also a focus of the "Indigenous Theology Conference", *Australian Catholic University*, Brisbane, 20th-23rd June, 2010.

Ten years ago my interfaith journey began. What I've learned in the past decade is what has been formally declared by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb. Photo copyright by Steve Herrera. In 2007 I engaged 15 Catholic and Buddhist teenagers in an immersion trip to Tijuana, Mexico to help build schools for Mexican children on the outskirts of town. On the first evening the Catholic teenagers were going to pray with traditional Catholic prayers. Prior to the prayer service, one of the Buddhist adults, Mary, asked if there was some place the Buddhist teens could go to do their evening chanting. I was struck by this question as I had not anticipated it. Another challenge for interfaith dialogue comes from an almost diametrically opposed approach, from the world of post-modernism. This approach declares that each religion or culture is a completely self-contained system that expresses itself in a particular language and pattern of symbols that can only be understood in relation to other words and symbols that constitute the complete system. This leads to the claim that interfaith dialogue is impossible because the participants are never talking the same language or mean the same things. Nevertheless, those of us who are deeply engaged in interreligious dialogue will treat the above-mentioned theory similarly to the way Benjamin Franklin treated the postulates of Bishop Berkley's "experience teaches us otherwise! Interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions (i.e., "faiths") and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels. It is distinct from syncretism or alternative religion, in that dialogue often involves promoting understanding between different religions or beliefs to increase acceptance of others, rather than to synthesize new beliefs.