

# **The CHALLENGE of COMPASSION in the GLOBAL AGE**

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## **Introduction**

May I begin by thanking you for this invitation to speak on this historic occasion and for the warm and generous introduction. I last spoke in my birth city in October 2013 on the History of Multicultural and Multifaith Bendigo at a special multicultural forum as part of the Festival of Cultures. Since that address, the whole controversy about the Bendigo mosque has blown up. And your city has received national and some international attention – much less, however, than your sister city down the road. The Catholic sexual abuse catastrophe, whilst it has had some impact upon the Diocese of Sandhurst, has not impacted upon Bendigo as it has on Ballarat

The point I want to make here is that pathologies can infect large religious organisations. In the case of Catholicism, it has been a sexual and gender fundamentalism which has been brought to the surface by the clerical child sex abuse scandal. Within in the Christian Orthodox Churches, it has been a religious and national fundamentalism where religion and national ethnicity have been too closely aligned, and one example at the moment is the close alignment between the Patriarch Kirill and Vladimir Putin in Russia.

In the case of Islam, it is a political fundamentalism that has erupted in the form of violence and terrorist attacks as Islam emerges from its long and sad history. Two nights ago, for the first time ever, the Grand Mufti of Australia spoke at a function celebrating UN Interfaith Week and Harmony Week. He spoke eloquently and poetically of Islam and Australia yet there has not been one single press report. This is very upsetting to the Islamic communities.

## **The Formation of the Bendigo Interfaith Council**

The formation of the Bendigo Interfaith Council is a very important step and reflects the growth of the interfaith movement across the globe. I want to publicly congratulate all of you and your fellow citizens for the stand you have taken in supporting the building of the mosque, in resisting racism and bigotry (both of which lie deep in the Australian psyche) and in defending the principles of religious freedom and the separation of religion and state. Unlike France and the U.S.A., the Australian model of separation is, like the Canadian, moderate and this has been quite important in our success as a multicultural, multilingual and multifaith nation.

As we were being briefed several times by Victoria Police from Bendigo about the mosque situation, it was clear to us that an interfaith body needed to be established. Behind the scenes, the police expressed their irritation to us that this was not happening quickly enough. But we know that it takes time in order to build the necessary spirit of trust and cooperation.

The global is local, and I think that it is another sign that Bendigo is taking the global age seriously. Religion is going to become very important for the economic welfare of Bendigo just as the Art Gallery has become. It seems to me that Bendigo has the opportunity to become “The Regional City of Culture and Faith” - the magnificent Sacred Heart Cathedral in the Gothic Revivalist tradition where my parents were married in 1944, and the other historic Christian Churches such as St. Paul’s Anglican Cathedral, the huge Buddhist stupa that is being built and said to be the largest in the Western World, the Golden Dragon Museum with its highlighting of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism of the Chinese goldminers and, lastly, the proposed museum with the theme of Faith on the Goldfields. Bendigo will have at its disposal a most attractive multifaith tourism package. Faith is already rewarding Bendigo. In terms of religious architecture, Bendigo has become the most important and religiously diverse regional city in Australia.

### **The Bendigo Mosque Controversy**

The formation of the Bendigo Interfaith Council stems from the realisation that in a global world, to be religious necessarily means to be interreligious. Recently in Dubai the UN World Interfaith Forum was held for the first time. The sheik who sponsored our visit and who is the Minister for Youth and Cultural Development in the United Arab Emirates after the Catholic bishop and Sikh leader had spoken used this axiom as his central theme.

Yet, as Rabbi John Levi has always told me, “Interfaith is a hard slog”. I have found that to be true. In reflecting upon the Bendigo mosque situation in my speech the other night in Canberra in responding to the Mufti, I pointed out that Islam was practised on Australian shores before Christianity by the Macassan fishermen who came annually across to Arnhem Land to fish for sea slugs (or trepang) as we know from the stories of the Aborigines and from the Macassan dialect and Arabic words in the local indigenous languages. These visits lasted up until Federation. Then came the Afghan cameleers who established the first mosques in towns like Maree and Broken Hill in outback Australia. Muslims have always been a small part of Australian history. Now it is growing and Muslims constituted 2.21 per cent of the total Australian population at the 2011 census – Hinduism and Sikhism are growing much faster than Islam in Australia. After World War Two, it was the Turkish Cypriots beginning in 1947, then the Turks in 1967 followed by the Lebanese Muslims in the 1970s. Because of so many birthplace groups, it has been difficult to unite the Islamic community and make it cohesive. But it is slowly happening, especially through the 40+ Islamic full-time schools operating across Australia.

In combating Islamophobia, the central point is that there are many different ways of being Australian, not just the Aussie way, and always have been. Eventually the Muslim community will find its niche in Australian society. Fortunately the moderate Muslim Australian leaders continue to support the Australian social and economic agenda, and that is very important. Economically the Islamic communities are very important for interacting economically and culturally with Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as the Middle East together with the huge Muslim minorities in China and India as well as the countries of Central Asia.

Forty days after 9/11, I was called to attend a meeting in New York of all 90+ national heads of Religions for Peace. The finale was a concert given by the New York Philharmonic Choir in St. Peter’s Church, the nearest church to Ground Zero with the reverberating noise of the great machines brought in to clean up the mess in the background. The parish priest told us how three weeks afterwards a man came up to him, “Father, I want to make an apology to you” – “What for?” It turned out he was a Jewish doctor who happened to be passing by as victims were being brought into the

church which was being used as a medical changing post. To bind up their wounds, the only thing available for bandages were the white cloths on top of the altar. Knowing how sacred they are to Catholics, he had come back to apologise for ripping them up. This doctor had been fully compassionate in caring for the injured victims of the 9/11 atrocity.

### **The Centrality of Compassion in Religious Traditions**

I have chosen to focus on the central role that compassion plays in all the great religious traditions, and I have also taken my cue from the full title of the Bendigo stupa, the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion given by the Dalai Lama. Many media commentators remarked that in his three appearances before the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse Cardinal Pell showed little compassion though there were plenty of apologies. Compassion did not figure in my theological education in Rome nor does it have an entry in the New Catholic Encyclopedia even though the Jewish Bible and the New Testament contain many references to the compassionate God. Pope Francis with his current emphasis on the companion idea of mercy is trying to bring Roman Catholic theology and pastoral practice back into the mainstream of Christian tradition. Islam especially links compassion and mercy. Each day and each sura or chapter of the Qur'an begin with the prayer invocation, "In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful".

Suffering is the English translation of the Buddhist word '*dukkha*' but it has a broader meaning for suffering is at the centre of Buddhism with the Four Noble Truths about the existence and cessation of suffering. Compassion is seen as wishing that all others be free from *dukkha*. The Dalai Lama believes that compassion provides the basis for human survival and is the radicalism of our times. He writes that "Western civilisations these days place great importance on filling the human brain with knowledge, but no one seems to care about filling the human heart with compassion".

Hinduism has several terms for compassion. *Karuna* is close to the meaning of empathy while *daya* has at its base that all of us must see all living sentient beings as part of one's own self and must see all suffering as one's own suffering. For Gandhi, compassion was a central concept in his Hindu philosophy. *Daya*, though spelled slightly differently in Punjabi, is one of the five essential qualities in Sikhism, the others being truth, contentment, humility and love.

Compassion is not pity nor is it just kindness nor just care nor just selflessness though both Hinduism and Buddhism recognise the importance of self-hood or self-efficacy, a type of consciousness that replaces the selfish ego. Compassion fundamentally is the response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has seen this very clearly for "with compassion, one becomes courageous." He adds, "Compassion is not just feeling with someone but seeking to change this situation. Frequently people think compassion and love are merely sentimental. No, they are very demanding. If you are going to be compassionate, be prepared for action". In Jewish thinking which would be echoed in Christian and Islamic teaching, God is the father of compassion.

The scholars talk about how the four major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism) follow a divine compassion model. But there are dangers embedded in this model because compassion is linked to divine acceptance and forgiveness. This plays into the hands of those who wield power, breeding acceptance, submission and happiness when there should be anger, protest and change. A primary danger which has come up in the child abuse saga is of cheap forgiveness, where forgiveness is given without any real, demonstrable commitment to change or to make amends.

The religions which derive from India and China are different; they follow a universal compassion model which is linked to ideas of enlightenment, equanimity, non-violence and self-sacrifice. Here the danger is of a compassion without teeth, a structural powerlessness and impotence which accepts oppression and injustice with the smiling face of stoicism.

In the Taoist masterpiece *Tao Te Ching*, said to have been written by the great Lao-Tze, it is written in chapter 67 that “I have just three things to teach, simplicity, patience and compassion”. He goes on, “These three are your greatest treasures. Simple in actions and in thoughts, you return to the source of being. Patient with both friends and enemies, you accord with the way things are. Compassionate toward yourself, you reconcile all beings to the world”.

In Australia in the past, we have been a quite compassionate country in accepting several million refugees which research shows have made excellent citizens beginning with the 160,000 DPs in 1947, many through the Bonegilla camp outside Wodonga. But over the past two decades since before the turn of the millennium the asylum seeker saga has badly damaged our reputation and self-image, especially the detention of children, and the sexual abuse of women and children. Remember when we threw little five-year-old Nancy Prasad out of Australia in the mid-1960s because she was not white!

Many religious people and their leaders have been rightly moved by compassion to speak out on the issue. It seems to me at this point in time that as a compassionate nation we consider the following solution, namely an amnesty. The government loudly proclaims, ‘The boats have been stopped’. Why then not give the asylum-seekers an amnesty just as in the late 1970s we gave an amnesty to illegal over-stayers who had been in Australia for 40 – 50 years? It would save much suffering; it would save much individual heartache; it would save much money and it would help unite the nation.

### **The Charter for Compassion**

In November 2009, under the leadership of the eminent religious historian, Karen Armstrong, the Charter for Compassion consisting of four paragraphs was launched to the world, supported by the Dalai Lama and many others. Over 100,000 people have affirmed it through its website. In 2010, Seattle became the first city to affirm the Charter. Could Bendigo also affirm the Charter?

I want to quote the final paragraph of the Charter:

**We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarised world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.**

Ultimately compassion is an antidote to global individualism; it is the antidote to anger and impulsive behaviour; it values the stories of others; rather than suppressing or fearing difference, it celebrates it and it appreciates how people are embedded in particular cultures and relationships. As the Buddha said, “In separateness lies the world’s great misery; in compassion lies the world’s true strength”.