



**INTERFAITH SYMPOSIUM: Faith, Social Cohesion and
Community Resilience**

Affinity Intercultural Foundation and Macquarie University

**Title: COVID-19: Impact, Responses, Learnings and Ongoing Challenges
for the World's Faith Communities in Australia**

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A healthy society needs healthy religion, not least in a time of crisis such as a pandemic. And this has been highlighted in many ways in Australia since impacting in March 2020. COVID-19 has upset our systems of work, education, finance and home life. This paper is looking back in order to look forward. Freedom of religion and belief is and always has been a relative, and not an absolute, right implying that governments can abrogate the right to religious freedom in special circumstances.

This occurred in COVID Australia when places of worship were closed, religious services were closed down or very severely curtailed as happened with funerals and weddings. There was some limited pushback, as was seen in August 2021 when 30 adults were fined \$1000 for attending a church service at the Christ Embassy Sydney in Blacktown and the church itself was fined \$5,000. But my perception was that government public health requirements were generally followed by religious leaders. And they were also encouraging of vaccination as was seen in Sydney on June 1st, 2021 when religious and community leaders joined Premier Berejiklian to be vaccinated giving witness to their communities. They played a not insignificant role in overcoming vaccine hesitancy.

Across the world, religious leaders have likewise generally acted sensibly with some exceptions such as a Pentecostal leader who recently became the first pastor in the U.S. to have his public defiance of the lockdown orders backed by the State Supreme Court on the basis that religion, like supermarkets, is an essential service. But Biblical Studies and Christian history

shows that religious leaders have shown leadership during plagues and pandemics. In the Book of Leviticus, Moses was instructed to quarantine people with symptoms. In 1576 in Milan, the archbishop, St. Charles Borromeo closed his churches but at prominent residential intersections he organized Masses so as people could watch from their windows. And often villages and towns were put into quarantine.

In India, Hindu leaders place the emphasis on spirituality and science and the individual's responsibility not to transgress the Dharma which is the support for the maintenance, progress and well-being of society. A Hindu specialist, Professor Deepali Bhanot of Delhi University, spoke of how Hindus look to prayer to the Almighty as an effective tool that provides solace and mental peace. Hindus were advised to pray at home in front of their small altars, and virtual services have kept people connected. Buddhist leaders such as the Venerable Thich Phuoc Tan in Braybrook in Melbourne spoke of how science can help in the cessation of suffering as part of the Eightfold Path, and of how meditation and mindfulness were important in times of crisis.

However, in Christianity part of the history is that as with earthquakes, floods and fires, some theologians saw pandemics as God's judgement on a sinful world and as a call to repentance. Across Europe since the 10th century there emerged flagellants who beat themselves as penance for themselves and the sins of others. But the history of the Christian Church is to provide solutions and care for the ill and dying. During the Spanish flu (1918 – 1919), the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney stood outside Sydney's North Head Quarantine Station demanding entry to minister to the dying. He took along the press, and he gained entry a day later. In Melbourne a century later, the Sikhs worked with Swinburne University with their *langar* mobile kitchens to feed international students and others who had no work during the lockdown. The Hindus sold two properties to support their followers, especially Indian students. The 200+ imams of Australia through their Australian Fatwa Council urged Muslims to say their five daily prayers at home.

Pope Francis immediately rejected the idea that the pandemic is God's judgement on a wicked world; rather he saw it as a call to live differently and more simply with prayer and the service of others. He said, "The pandemic storm had made people realize that we are all in the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented. Our vulnerabilities have uncovered our false certainties. It is the time to decide to live differently, to live better, to love more and to care more". Later he added that "we must cure a greater virus, that of social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalization and the lack of protection of the weakest". The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, in urging Christians to comply with public health instructions, advised, "What is at stake is not our faith, but our faithful".

The other major aspect of the religious response was the creativity of religious leaders and their communities, especially in holding online liturgical services and ceremonies. In the online Catholic Mass that I and my family followed on Saturday evenings, we were joined by young detainees from one of Melbourne's detention centres. Another aspect as one major example was the Religions for Peace International C-19 Hub working in partnership with UNICEF to produce the *Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action C-19 Initiative* which remains a living document. Its guidance was built around three elements for religious communities, (1) Adapting how we

gather, pray and practise rituals, (2) communicating to end misinformation, discrimination and to instil hope and (3) helping people who are at risk. The advice is partly given in an appendix. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change set out a very useful *Guide for Governments Working with Religious Leaders to Support Public-Health Measures*.

However, I think there were three learnings that we as Australian religious, interfaith and humanist communities need to learn from the last two years.

Firstly, there needs to be more organized communication channels and more cooperation between governments, health authorities and religious communities. It seemed to work best in New South Wales. Here I want to recommend that Australia and each State and Territory ought have an interreligious council within its multicultural structures composed of key religious leaders. Its benefits would be:

- A formal, encompassing and representative body that provides connectivity between governments and their agencies and the religious/spiritual/humanist sector in the nation's commitment to social cohesion
- A coordinating body that has the surge capacity to assist the Australian and other governments in responding to national emergencies and natural disasters e.g. working with their communities to overcome vaccination hesitancy
- A body that can interact with government in presenting any concerns and possible initiatives in the areas of public policies and programs, including in social, moral and economic development and in the educational, health and welfare sectors
- A national and international body that can liaise with similar national and international faith and interfaith bodies and other connected bodies across the world

A well-conceived interreligious council could be a central component of multicultural policy and community cohesion due to the connection between religion and culture, and to the fact that healthy religion contributes to social and economic capital, to multicultural social cohesion and to interreligious harmony. To describe Australia as a secular society is not helpful because of the different meanings given to the word 'secular' – it is preferable to describe Australia as a civil society.

Secondly, the relationships between governments and faith communities need to be better framed within a framework on the governance of religion and religious diversity. The responsibilities of the stance in the governance of religious diversity are to keep an open religious market which research shows prevents the emergence and growth of ultra-fundamentalist religious movements (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal & Leahy 2004), and to **facilitate** religious practice in meeting the spiritual and religious needs of many of its citizens in exercising their right to religious freedom. The second role is to encourage harmony and contact between the different faith communities – in this sense, it has to play more of a **brokering** role. Hence the key role of the interfaith movement and government support. Thirdly, it also has a **monitoring** role to detect, at the earliest possible moment, causes of difference and tensions between the religious groups, then to act purposefully in defusing such

tensions and conflict from escalating into violence and to unmask the real motives behind conflicts. It has to monitor and take **protective** action against bad religious practice that threatens the state itself or its citizens or some of its citizens.

In the creation of a “civic ethos” or “a culture of reconciliation and co-operation”, the regulation of religious diversity is, first, a process and in Australia has had the following features:

- 1. The state through its constitutional, legislative, judicial and policing processes treats all faith and non-faith traditions on the basis of equality and neutrality**
- 2. The state establishes the appropriate legislation to regulate the place of religion in civil society with the legislation being administered fairly and in time.**
- 3. The leaders of faith communities show how they contribute to the nation’s social capital through their teachings and activities**
- 4. The state does not recognize any statute of religious law though religious elements (e.g. regarding marriage) may be incorporated into civil law**
- 5. The faith communities have the political, economic and educational space to safeguard, develop and transmit their traditions, and are able to worship and meditate, own property, form associations and establish educational facilities freely but within an intercultural and interfaith climate.**
- 6. The state puts into place mechanisms to accommodate essential religious practices in conflict with either state legislation or core national values and practice through a process of cultural/religious impact assessment and accommodation**

Central to the process of the governance and management of religion and religious diversity has been the accommodation mechanism, which implies the change in program or law to accommodate a particular custom. For example, cemetery regulations have been changed to accommodate Islamic burial practice; criminal justice laws have been adjusted to accommodate the Sikh wearing of turbans rather than helmets and the carrying of the ritual *kirpan* or dagger in contravention of the laws on offensive weapons. This is called the Principle of Negotiated Accommodation. A current example is that State governments led by Victoria have been passing legislation outlawing the Nazi swastika but allowance has been made for the Hindus (and Buddhists and Jains) to use their ‘sacred swastika’.

Thirdly, following on from the above comments we must examine the issues of bad religion and bad religious practices. Religion often has a dark side. During the pandemic some religious

groups refused to follow health regulations or to be vaccinated because they believed, for example that ‘God is our shield’, by a false or misleading of a scriptural text. Some evangelical Christians have been suggesting that the COVID vaccines are ‘the mark of the beast’. There were priests, imams and rabbis across the world declaring the C-19 is a divine punishment upon non-believers and that people of their own faith would be immune. Hardline clerics opposed the directives of the World Health Organization (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2020). Religious leaders have a responsibility for countering false claims, conspiracy theories and stigmatization of groups.

Our spiritualities animate the best that is human, making ourselves channels of peace for great compassion, love and service as proclaimed by all the world’s great spiritual traditions. Rational, creative and constructive dialogue leads to progress and reconciliation and understanding. Today, to be authentically religious implies being authentically multicultural and interreligious.

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APPENDIX ONE

JOINT RECOMMENDATIONS from UNICEF and RELIGIONS for PEACE INTERNATIONAL

All governments and communities should join forces to:

ADAPT

...Faith gatherings, rituals and services in keeping with the RfP-ACT Alliance Statement and WHO Guidance on religious mass gatherings, burials and rituals to honour international and national health authorities’ guidance on public health related to faith community gatherings, services and rituals such as funerals, marriages and births for the health and safety of religious followers while developing alternative pastoral approaches.

PROMOTE

...Heightened focus on hygiene and sanitation in keeping and sacred texts that emphasize cleanliness as an element of holiness.

...Listening to children and families, through organized spaces for dialogue online, through media and where permitted house-to-house, and within small group for a (keeping distance).

...Intergenerational dialogue to give voice to girls, boys together with parents and communities to find solutions to issues surrounding the pandemic.

...Voices of faith and wider community engagement to inform local responses as well as national policy-making and programmes.

COUNTER

...All forms of stigma and discrimination associated with transmission of the disease with active promotion of attitudes and behaviours to uphold the dignity and rights of all people.

PROVIDE

...Active engagement of networks of religious communities including faith-based women, and youth, in collaboration with local governance structures, to provide organized voluntary services in:

- Spiritual and emotional care and support for parents, children, the elderly and those experiencing disruption and distress in order to provide a source of support, peace, comfort and hope.
- Positive age-specific and gender-responsive parenting guidance and support to families in relation to the health, development, protection and social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, particularly in low-income families and those most vulnerable and hardest to reach.
- Youth-friendly communication and engagement including their support with more systematic use of technology and social media as a connective communication platform for communities during periods of physical distancing and beyond.
- We stand united in this global inter-faith moment of hope and solidarity for the survival, protection and development of our children, families and communities.

