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Multifaith initiatives in Victoria

Anna Halafoff

Following crisis events – including September 11, and the Bali and London bombings – religious communities in Australia increasingly initiated multifaith activities to dispel negative stereotypes and to promote understanding between people of diverse faith traditions. In Victoria in particular, culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse (CRALD) communities collaborated with the state, including the police, aiming to build positive community relations informed by the principles of multiculturalism.

These initiatives proved successful in advancing social inclusion and common security. Consequently, while multiculturalism was and continues to be widely criticised in Europe and Australia as fostering processes of radicalisation within immigrant communities, especially after the 2005 London bombings, Victorian experiences counter this claim. Victorian CRALD communities reported that rising narrow nationalism and a return to assimilationist immigration strategies, as promoted by the former Australian federal government under the leadership of John Howard, legitimised prejudices in Australian society and exacerbated feelings of exclusion among minority groups. It follows that a narrow nationalism, which propagates anti-Muslim and anti-multicultural sentiments, is likely to lead to conflict in an ever more globalised world in which societies are becoming increasingly religiously diverse and faith traditions continue to play a central role in the majority of people's lives.

Australia, like other Western multifaith societies such as the USA and the UK, has a long history of multifaith engagement. The first formal attempts at multifaith dialogue occurred in Melbourne in the 1960s, predating the introduction of multicultural policies. Anglican Archbishop Frank Woods began inviting diverse faith leaders to meet for a meal and discussion at Bishops court, facilitating greater understanding between faith traditions, and the beginning of friendships between religious leaders. In the 1980s, the Council of Christians and Jews was established in Australia. There was gradually a wider interest in multifaith engagement, particularly in Victoria where the Office of Multicultural Affairs assisted the establishment of a Multi-faith Resource Centre, an unofficial inter-religious council. However, only a few years later the Centre dissolved as a result of division and conflict. From 1987 onward, the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) began to play an influential role in Australia, and in 1989, its fifth World Assembly was held at Monash University. The event was a great success, with over 700 delegates, half of whom were international, and the Australian WCRP national office was established in Melbourne where it has remained active to this day.

The 1990s was a time of increased multifaith engagement in Australia at the national, state and local council levels: the Uniting Church set up working groups with both Jewish and Muslim communities; the Council of Christians and Jews expanded throughout Australia; the Australian Council of Churches established a Commission for Dialogue with Living Faith and Community Relations, and also a Working Group on Religious Liberty. Multifaith organisations were also formed in Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane and New South Wales during this period. In Melbourne, Monash University conducted several research and community engagement projects and the Springvale City Council formed a multifaith network (now the Interfaith Network of the Greater City of Dandenong) that organises tours to a variety of places of worship in their area. Faith leaders joined together in 1993 to support Aboriginal land rights and to raise concerns over the decrease of social services in Victoria. Christian and Jewish groups also reached out to assist Muslim communities during and after the Gulf War.

Following September 11, the focus of multifaith engagement, as in other Western societies, largely shifted toward dialogue among the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Muslim communities, academics and the state began to initiate multifaith activities with agendas of social cohesion and counter-terrorism. Indeed, following September 11, issues of national security were imposed on multicultural and multifaith organisations and Muslim communities, which were well positioned to challenge cultures of violence and promote peace in their stead.

An increase in multifaith activities also occurred at the local council level in Victoria in Dandenong, Moreland, Geelong, Hume and Kingston. The Turkish-based Fethullah Gülen Movement's Australian Intercultural Society in Melbourne, and Affinity in Sydney began organising multifaith events and initiatives, often in partnership with Jewish and Christian communities and academic institutions. The Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Jews and Muslims, including the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, the Executive Council

Religious vilification does occur here. But the Victorian government's commitment, against global trends, to promoting multicultural and multifaith community as a peace-building strategy arguably protected the Victorian community from terrorism at a time when home-grown terrorism posed a significant threat to Western societies.

InterAction Launch, Interfaith Youth Core Training at Monash University, November 2009

of Australian Jewry and the National Council of Churches of Australia, became increasingly active following September 11. At a national level, in April 2003 the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia established a special multifaith committee, the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations, including representatives from Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i and Sikh communities.

In particular, a significant rise in educational activities promoting awareness and understanding of Muslim culture and of multifaith engagement occurred in Victoria after September 11, and the Bali and London bombings. Muslim communities became more active in addressing the negative effects of divisive and ill-informed media reporting through positive engagement with the media, and Muslim public intellectuals countered negative stereotypes and sought to promote understanding of their communities through commercial and independent media.

In Victoria, community-led initiatives such as Mosque open days, multifaith educational programs, symposia and festivals, received state government funding. The Victorian Government, Victoria Police and several local councils also initiated a plethora of multifaith activities in partnership with faith communities, including the Victorian Government's Community Accord; Celebrate our Cultural Diversity Week; the Premier's Multifaith Leaders Forum (now the Multifaith Advisory Group); the Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network; the Australasian Police Multicultural Advisory Bureau; and Victoria Police's Multicultural Advisory Unit, and Multifaith. These initiatives have been aimed at fostering an inclusive Victorian community in which religious diversity is welcome, religious traditions and practices are respected as long as they are consistent with the law and human rights, and good relations are developed in diverse communities. New communities are assisted with settlement and in managing tensions, whether old or new, should they occur. These initiatives have contributed to building genuinely secure communities and have also formed a significant part of preventative counter-terrorism strategies. Indeed, CRALD communities have praised the Victorian Government for their commitment to multiculturalism. They also expressed a positive view of Victoria Police for their community engagement and willingness to work with communities to address critical issues. Victoria Police's community policing approach has been cited as an effective counter-terrorism strategy in Victoria.



Such peace-building initiatives in Victoria have countered extremism by normalising religious pluralism, lessening the potential for alienation and radicalisation in multifaith societies. They have encouraged dialogue as a non-violent means of influencing policy and effecting social change.

Networks that include religious representatives alongside police, teachers and journalists have been highly effective. Optimistically, since the decisive defeat of John Howard's federal Liberal Government, the Labor government has adopted similar measures, to promote "greater inclusiveness and opportunity in Australia" (Attorney-General Robert McClelland, 2008) and to address "underlying causes of radical extremism".

Exclusion is a major contributing factor to global risk. While concerns have been raised that multiculturalism "undermines solidarity and trust" because "people are more likely to afford equal treatment to others with whom they share a common identity and common values", lessening marginalisation of minority groups through inclusive policies such as multiculturalism can actually encourage their participation in society and therefore increase feelings of solidarity. Moreover, promoting a multicultural and multifaith view of Victorian identity ensures that a common unity can be found beyond the oppositional 'us and them' of narrow nationalism and policies of assimilation.

That is not to say that acts of racial or religious vilification do not occur in Victoria, or that multiculturalism in Victoria does not have its critics. However, in the face of such obstacles, the government of Victoria has maintained its commitment to promoting an inclusive multicultural and multifaith community as a peace-building strategy, against global trends and against the divisive policies of the former Howard government. This decision arguably protected the Victorian community from terrorism at a time when terrorism, home-grown terrorism in particular, posed a significant threat to Western societies.

To celebrate Victoria's success in promoting harmonious multifaith relations, Melbourne was chosen as the site of the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, which brought multifaith activists from all over the world to discuss the PWR's main themes of healing the earth, reconciliation, overcoming poverty, social cohesion, inner peace, securing food and water, and social justice. More recently, Victorian faith communities and the Victorian Multicultural Commission have prioritised multifaith youth initiatives and also activities focussed on countering the risk of climate change. This is evident in the formation of two new organisations in Victoria, GreenFaith Australia (2009), which has chapters in the USA, and InterAction (2009), a multifaith youth network that is modelled on the Interfaith Youth Core, based in Chicago. Finally, as a legacy of the Melbourne Parliament of World's Religions, the Faith Community Council of Victoria (FCCV) was established in 2010, as Victoria's umbrella multifaith body. The FCCV is the successor to the Leaders of Faith Communities Forum, which was founded in 1995.

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This change in focus reflects global developments and demonstrates that faith communities, alongside others, continue to play a critical role in peace-building by challenging both direct and structural violence.

These developments indicate that ten years on from the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Victoria's commitment to promoting positive multicultural and multifaith relations has strengthened, and that while the focus has shifted away somewhat from countering terrorism, it has moved to new threats, such as climate change and economic crises. This change in focus reflects global developments and demonstrates that faith communities, alongside others, continue to play a critical role in peace-building by challenging both direct and structural violence.

Dr Anna Halafoff is a lecturer at the School of Political and Social Inquiry and a researcher for the UNESCO Chair in Inter-religious and Intercultural Relations – Asia Pacific, at Monash University. She has recently been listed as a Global Expert in multifaith relations for the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations.

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