

Editorial: Faith in a pluralist society

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There's nothing quite like birth, death, separation, cancer, and selling your home to make you think about the meaning of life and what you believe. The last few months have completely tested every thing I believed to be true and real about life. William Blake, the mystic and poet said that we are here to learn to endure the beams of love. I've had to be vulnerable and allow the cracks to show. In doing so, I've received love, support and unexpected kindnesses which have reminded me that we can touch each other through our vulnerability as well as our strength. The purpose of this journal issue is to explore the ways in which our deepest beliefs are manifested in the private and public sphere.

Where religion was once implicitly woven into our social, legal and artistic lives (Wilkinson, 2006) it has become more explicit. Increased immigration from non-traditional source countries, the growth of Muslim communities in the West and the politicisation of Islam has increased societal anxiety and the desire to address issues of cohesion and national identity. Peach (2006) argues that in Britain the discourse on racialised minorities has shifted from 'colour' to 'race' to 'ethnicity' and now to 'religion'. Globally, inter-faith developments have increased in response to concerns about social cohesion.

This brings me to the theme of this journal issue: Faith and ethnic communities. The word, "ethnic" (which is used in New Zealand policy to denote people who are NOT Pākehā, Pacific or Māori) originates from the word 'heathen' according to the Oxford Dictionary. "Ethnic" originally referred to people who lived on the heath and specifically to those who were considered non-believers by believers. This journal issue has the following aims

- To provide a background nationally and internationally to the issues of faith.
- To outline some of the tensions of using faith as an umbrella term.
- To provide an overview of some of the practical steps organisations are making to engage with faith issues.
- To facilitate debate about the terms that are being used such as faith, ethnic, diversity, pluralism and diversity including obtaining perspectives from people who don't have a religious identity.
- To highlight new local research about the inclusion of groups for example lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons in Christian congregations and the experiences and impact of Muslim converts.

- To promote religious literacy and knowledge of other faiths.

Many of the articles are about religious issues in general, and those that refer to specific religions also function as case studies that make points of general relevance. The heightened interest in Islam in recent years is reflected in the number of contributions in this area.

To set the scene a little we begin with the need for this dialogue about faiths and between faiths. Three trends are becoming noticeable: first, that religious participation by Pakeha New Zealanders is declining while changes in immigration policy have resulted in the introduction and growth of both diasporic religious traditions (such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on) and the invigoration of Christian denominations. The 2001 Census noted that more than half the New Zealand population identified with a Christian religion (Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian dominating) and the largest non-Christian religions were Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Spiritualism and New Age religions. However, the rise in diasporic religious traditions has been viewed as increasingly problematic since 9/11, for example where Islam was once viewed as a religion of peace and tolerance, more familiar media images are of politicised crowds burning effigies (Werbner, 2004).

Joris de Bres our Race Relations Commissioner begins with an exploration of why dialogues about faith are necessary. De Bres suggests that the Human Rights Commission has an obligation under the Human Rights Act are to promote respect for human rights, and to encourage the maintenance and development of harmonious relationships between the diverse groups that make up New Zealand society. He argues that no other public agency has such a clear statutory mandate to promote the right to religion (including the right not to hold a religious belief), and to promote understanding between faith communities. de Bres argues that this does not in any way compromise the secular nature of the Commission. The state has as much of a responsibility to engage with citizens who share a community of belief as they do with those who

share a community of culture, ethnicity or geography. Global tensions and conflicts associated with different religions can have consequences within New Zealand in terms, for example, of prejudice against visible religious minorities.

Asking if tolerance is really enough, Todd Nachowitz outlines the architectural contributions of new migrant communities where the “new rounded domes and marbled spires represent triumphs.” Nachowitz quantifies the growing ethnic and religious diversity of New Zealand from 1991 to 2006 pointing out that not only has the number of adherents increased but there is also an increase in the diversity of faiths themselves. Nachowitz suggests that New Zealand is a religiously illiterate nation going by the lack of understanding about other religions and forms of practice. Who knew that there were more ‘Jedi Knights’ than adherents of Buddhism, Islam Hinduism and Judaism in New Zealand in 2001! Nachowitz advances going beyond the passivity of tolerance to active engagement suggesting individual and collective strategies. Individually we can comparatively study religion and experience what others do in their places of worship. Collectively, our faith communities can work to engage in interfaith dialogues as well as ensuring that multicultural curricula are a part of the classroom experience.

Jon Carapiet uses appropriated images from the media to explore political and spiritual themes through photo-installations. His Anglo-Armenian heritage provides him with a personal connection to genocide and holocaust. He questions the numbing effects on viewers fed a visual diet of war by mass media. His aim is not to reiterate such imagery but to provide an antidote, crossing the boundaries of labels like “Christian”, “Buddhist” or “Hindu” to collaborate against war and instead speak of compassion and love.

A European perspective is provided by Bashy Quraishy, President of the European Network against Racism in Brussels and the Chief Editor of Media Watch in Copenhagen who argues that the concerns of ethnic and religious minorities have been homogenised and displaced by a

perceived Islamic threat. The increasing emphasis on European-ness at the cost of interculturalism seems to be leading to the dismantling of a multicultural society replaced with monocultural ideologies and a fortress mentality. Quraisy suggests that unless racism is confronted, integration and social cohesion will not occur.

The shift from religion being an implicit aspect of society to an explicit one is discussed by Andrew Butcher who argues that New Zealand's rapidly changing demography, with high levels of immigration has meant that the Interfaith Dialogue and the Statement on Religious Diversity have received far more mainstream media coverage and public discourse that they would have in more homogeneous New Zealand fifty years ago. Butcher proposes that "joining a faith community provides an immediate social network for many migrants and frequently gives migrants a place to belong and a new sense of 'family' and 'home', particularly where they have left those two things behind in another country". Butcher contextualises Christianity, suggesting that it is not and never has been a Western religion; it began in a pluralist social context similar to the New Zealand in the third millennium.

Two writers examine perceived 'threats' to religion. Verpal Singh suggests that organised religion is fighting a losing battle with philosophies and sciences which encourage people to question everything. While questioning is viewed as the starting point of reasoning, leading to ever greater insights, in a religious context can be seen as an indication of heretical behaviour. Thus, even though science and philosophy do not seek to consciously undermine religion, they are viewed as doing exactly that. Singh's view is that science has taken a pre-eminent position in providing answers to our questions, but in doing so presumes that it has answers to all the questions. He argues that scientists, it would seem, are the new clergy – or the new prophets. The need to discuss and study the collapse of religion and what might be taking its place in most of the West is proposed by John Raeburn who suggests that the implications are

potentially profound, radical and irreversible. Raeburn argues that religion has been a driver of Western society and history for centuries and notes the pressures affecting Christian religions and asks how traditional religions of migrant groups will withstand these changes. Raeburn talks about the arrival of the 'new spirituality' which encompasses a broad array of different spiritual, holistic health, body, personal development, self-help, metaphysical, astrological, occult, and other items often termed 'New Age'. Raeburn's article raises questions about the links between spirituality, religion and faith; and also whether the 'me' focussed new spirituality omits the community and public good which Churches were focused on.

The need for dialogue between faith and secularity (Leith, 2006) is critiqued by Ken Perrott who debates the hegemony and exclusivity of the inter-faith developments occurring in New Zealand from an atheist perspective. Arguing that current efforts to develop understanding and cooperation in New Zealand focus on ethnic and religious groups at the expense of the third of the population with non-religious beliefs, Perrott suggests a more inclusive platform is required. Critiquing the National Statement on Religious Diversity, Perrott proposes a focus on diversity of belief, rather than religious diversity. Perrott concludes by indicating that critique is necessary for cooperation to occur between groups, and a lack of debate and criticism in this area will limit progress and result in work built on shaky foundations.

Practical strategies for engaging with faith communities are shared from a local government and Asia-Pacific regional perspectives. Abigael Vogt outlines Auckland City Council's Community Development Group's Inter-faith project. The project focuses on religious and spiritual diversity within the community and aims to both strengthen existing relationships and foster new ones between communities. Within the project the council's role is to support, promote and facilitate these relationships. In addition there is a focus on working locally, nationally and internationally. Joris de Bres outlines

developments such as the Auckland Alliance of Civilisations Symposium and Building Bridges: The Third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue which took place at Waitangi, New Zealand in May this year. From this dialogue the New Zealand delegation prepared a discussion paper and put forward recommendations which have now been incorporated into the Waitangi Declaration and Action Plan and focuses on three main areas: Building bridges, education and media.

The issue of faith in an increasingly anxious society is taken up by Heather Kavan who takes a closer, more sympathetic look at the case of Korean exorcist Luke Lee who was found guilty of manslaughter in New Zealand in 2001 and who had his conviction overturned by the High Court last year. With a background in research on extreme religion, Kavan suggests that Lee was a typical example of a person in a religious altered state. Kavan contextualises Lee's Korean Pentecostal background suggesting that Korean Pentecostals routinely engage in shamanistic rituals of freeing people from evil spirits, accompanied by thunderous sounding prayer and such exorcism is considered a normal activity.

Contributors also grapple with issues of inclusion and exclusion within and between faith communities. Mark Henricksen talks about the Lavender Islands study of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons in New Zealand. Henricksen's research participants struggled to reconcile a religious affiliation with a sexual identity, and in each instance had chosen in favour of their sexual identities at the expense of the religious affiliation. Despite their fraught relationships with faith communities, some LGBs remain resilient and connected to their religious traditions. The development of new kinds of relationships between religious communities and individuals is described by American contributor Lance Laird as "interreligion". The sharing of symbols and stories across boundaries can lead to understanding and invention. Using a dance metaphor, Laird outlines the temporal and relational aspects of his faith. Elaborating how his journey from Southern Baptist roots to dancing with Islam opened up a whole new world

of Christian devotion leading him to practice his faith differently, in partnership and in dialogue. Laird speaks about how he began seeing religious traditions in relationship to each other and how people make choices to read, do, believe certain parts of their tradition more than other parts—under different conditions and at different times in their lives. Which leads to a piece by Ruqayya Sulaiman-Hill who questions why anyone would willingly choose to restrict their eating options, fast for a whole month every year, adhere to a different dress code, suffer possible rejection from friends and family and enjoy spending time in contemplation and prayer? Sulaiman-Hill discusses the phenomenon of religious conversion and shares some of the results of a study undertaken prior to the terrorist attacks in 2001 with a group of thirty one Kiwi Muslim converts. She finds that conversion to Islam is the result of a gradual change in beliefs and attitudes, often over several years rather than the highly emotional transformations sometimes associated with Christian revivalist meetings. From an Islamic perspective the term reversion is apt referring to the experience of believing they were already Muslim in their souls and a sense of returning to Islam. The most common challenges facing converts in their relationships with fellow New Zealanders and other Muslims is also discussed. This fertilisation and openness to new ideas is taken up further by Larry Stillman from Melbourne who traces his quest for God-wrestling—the struggle with Jewish tradition combined with a social justice perspective with the internal journey of understanding his religious, cultural, and ethnic identity while living in Israel, Australia and the United States.

On a final note, I'd like to acknowledge the tremendous work Andy Williamson has put into this journal. Andy has moved to the United Kingdom to pursue some new opportunities. I'd also like to thank Dave Moskovitz, Diana Grant Mackie, Danny Butt, Megan Sobr, Maria Hoverlmeier and Sarah DeSouza for their feedback. I'd like to acknowledge the wonderful cover produced by FitzBeck Creative. The cover highlights the hope that we can have many

different kinds of flowers in our gardens and celebrate their differences (and note their similarities too). To continue the gardening theme, this journal provides some rich compost that I hope feeds the new kinds of relationships we can have with each other that nurture human flourishing (Leith, 2006). My belief and faith in myself, my family and friendships has got me through this tough time and I dedicate this journal to my two nieces Charlotte and Aleka, the first of our family to be born in this special land Aotearoa.

Ruth

P.S Should we be calling non-believers ethnic?

References

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