

“Our Nation – Can We Grow Together?”

**An Address to the 6th International Interreligious Abraham Conference
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I acknowledge the indigenous people of this ancient land, whose stories, rituals and sacred places served as bearers of meaning long before those of Abraham’s children reached these shores.

“Can we grow together?”

A good question. Ours is not the first generation of Australians to ask it. Indeed, on the very day modern Australia was born, its people came up against some of the complications to which religious diversity sometimes gives rise.

Plans were well advanced for the events of that historic day, 1 January 1901. In a ceremony at Sydney’s Centennial Park, the Commonwealth of Australia was to be proclaimed and its first governor-general sworn in. At the last minute, however, there was a hitch. An unholy row had erupted between the Anglican archbishop of Sydney and his Roman Catholic counterpart over which of them should have precedence in the official procession.

After much huffing and puffing the archbishop won. Cardinal Moran withdrew from the proceedings altogether. Not to be outdone, leaders of the Wesleyan, Methodist and Presbyterian churches decided to boycott things as well.

It was not one of religion’s better days. Many must have wondered quietly that day whether the long centuries of ecclesiastical bitterness would ever end, whether with its divided religious heritage the new nation could ever become one.

As we know, that conflict between Christians has ended, for the most part anyway. The past half century has seen a transformation of church relationships. Those whose grandparents regarded each other as enemies have become friends. Churches that were at odds now work in partnership.

If the miracle of healing can happen *within* a faith community, it can happen *between* faith communities. “Can we grow together?” asks today’s theme. Yes, we who have been shaped by different traditions of faith surely can. Indeed, demonstrably we *are* growing together. And we *must continue* to grow together. But how?

Drawing in part on my years spent helping Australia’s churches find each other, let me offer a few practical suggestions for taking further our Jewish/Christian/Muslim relationships. I propose ten points for your consideration. Ten – a good biblical number. But they are not commandments, not on tablets of stone, and I make no claim to be a Moses.

Ten Tips for Togetherness:

1. Remember that before we are Jews, Christians, Muslims or anything else, we are human beings. We share our mortality, our hopes and dreams, our follies and foibles, our need for divine mercy. With all people everywhere we struggle to make sense of life, yearning for light in the darkness, for love in the loneliness, for meaning in the madness, for grace in the emptiness. This shared human identity precedes and outweighs all other identities – be they religious, national, ethnic, political, whatever. Never lose sight of the fact that the people of our three faith traditions, with the people of other faith traditions and indeed with people of no faith tradition at all, have so much in common.
2. Treat other religions the way you would like their people to treat yours. It is too temptingly easy to compare my religion at its best with someone else's at its worst. Better, and fairer, to look at both in terms of what at their best they aspire to be, not just what they are. In particular, watch out for negative stereotyping. There is a lot of it going around right now, and the anti-religious mood of the moment in this country means that we are all likely to find ourselves its victims.
3. Remind yourself regularly that none of our religions has captured God. The divine Reality is vastly more mysterious than our feeble minds can grasp or our stuttering words express. "God, the eternal Presence, does not permit himself to be held," warned the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. "Woe to the man so possessed that he thinks he possesses God". Woe too to our religious communities when they labor under the same illusion. Cherish your doctrines, by all means, but do not confuse them with the divine Mystery itself.
4. Recognize the common challenge that is facing our three faith communities, stemming from the shallow secularism of contemporary Australia. I cannot recall a time when religion here was under more sustained attack from so many different quarters. Census figures suggest that many of our compatriots, especially the young, are turning their backs on our teachings, rituals and traditions. While this may be an institutional problem for us, it is a human tragedy of vast proportions for those who have left us. Yet our religious communities are the improbable trustees of a treasure trove of wisdom, beauty and sanctity that testifies to a transcendent Reality and invites people to find their ultimate fulfilment in the divine purpose. Helping people who feel alienated from religion rediscover the treasure we seem to have hidden from their eyes -- that challenge, awesome in its scope, is one we share.
5. Be alert to other opportunities that may present themselves for our three faith communities to stand together. We have done so, in the past, when synagogues, churches or mosques found themselves under attack, and our leaders stood together saying that an attack on one house of prayer anywhere is an attack every house of prayer everywhere. We have done so when hysteria was being whipped up against one group or another by populist politicians and irresponsible media. In the present political climate [a reference to the detention and expulsion of Dr Mohamed Haneef], I would suggest, the faith

communities may need to stand together publicly once again, to affirm the presumption of innocence and the rule of law in this nation and to challenge the dangerous new doctrine of guilt-by-association.

6. Some in each of our religious communities carry bad memories, from other times and places, of treatment meted out to them by people of other religions. The scars are real. But unhappy memories need not limit what we might do, in Australia today, by way of new beginnings. Some of the bad memories, however, point to problems that are still with us. Some hurts we continue to inflict on each other, often without being aware of it. Emerging relationships must provide for the frank discussion of these problems, with a view to doing something about them. A current example: Christian evangelism long has been an irritant, not only to Jews and Muslims but to others as well and even, in the form of proselytism, to other Christians. The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, with the participation of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, are now developing a “Christian code of conduct on religious conversion”. To identify such problems, then fix them, each of our faith communities will find itself facing new agenda items.
7. Prepare yourself for a paradigm shift. For centuries our religious communities have defined themselves *over against* one another. The focus was on what made “my” religion different from “yours” with the invisible sub-text all too often dealing with how that difference then justified “my” attitude of superiority and “your” destiny of being discriminated against. We are now being invited to think in a new way and define ourselves *in relationship* with one another. For most of us this will be a new exercise. Expect some lively debate, not least with nervous co-religionists who take fright at the prospect.
8. Seize every opportunity to build mutual understanding and confidence. When the history of Australia’s interfaith relations eventually gets written, perhaps a footnote somewhere will mention that one morning, around the turn of this century, three people in national leadership roles -- Amjad Mehboob (Muslim), Jeremy Jones (Jewish) and myself (Christian) -- had coffee together, liked each other, decided they could work together and determined to do everything possible to build harmony – for the benefit not only of their respective faith communities, but of the wider Australian society as well. In synagogues, churches and mosques across the land, many people, similarly, have been demonstrating that more things are wrought by simple friendship and trust than this world dreams of.
9. Do not lose sight of Australia’s other faith communities. Yes, we are grateful for the developing relationships between Jews, Christians and Muslims, but take care not to give the impression that we think monotheistic religions are the only ones that matter. Jews and Muslims in this country have squirmed often enough in the face of Christian arrogance. Take care not to replace that with a sort of “Abrahamic” arrogance towards Buddhists, Hindus and others. Our context, after all, is Asia, not the Middle East or Europe, and we had better make sure we take seriously Asia’s rich and varied religious complexity.

10. Finally, keep your sense of humor. Religious people who take themselves too seriously are a danger to traffic. “He who sits in the heavens laughs,” says Psalm 2, and we should too. There is much said and done in the name of religion that God must find heartbreaking. But there is also a lot that God must find very funny indeed. Let’s not be afraid to join in the heavenly mirth and laugh along too – focusing, of course, on our own follies and foibles, before those of others.

Friends, a wonderful opportunity has been set before us. The Australian author Tim Winton, in his novel *The Riders*, has his lead character, an expatriate Australian, looking out over the countryside of Ireland. “It was a small, tooled, and crosshatched country,” he muses. “Every field had a name, every path a style. Everything imaginable had been done or tried out there.” But his homeland, he remembers, felt different. “In Australia you looked out and saw the possible, the spaces, the maybes”.

Other countries may have long histories behind them. Modern Australia’s has barely begun. The national identities of others may be set in concrete. Ours continues to evolve. Those dramatic possibilities, those spaces, those maybes, combine to make this an extraordinarily exciting nation to be part of right now.

They also make it an extraordinarily exciting context in which to articulate the rich traditions of faith that we represent. A society in flux, a national identity under construction, a nation whose history lies before us not behind, offer Australia’s religious communities untold possibilities for redefining their imported relationships, reconciling their separated memories and reworking attitudes towards each other that were shaped for times and places far from here.

My hope is that gatherings like today’s will increasingly create a shared sacred space from which Australia’s religious communities are inspired to look out, together, to glimpse what are for us “the possible, the spaces, the maybes”.

May it be so.

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