

Education for ministry and mission in multifaith and multicultural Australia

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP, SAYS SEFOROSA CARROLL.

THE AUSTRALIAN context is rapidly changing, in terms of both its cultural and religious diversity. These changes in the Australian landscape are here to stay. They will continue to form a major part of our Australian identity.

Diana Eck observes that we are now living in a new geo-religious reality. She states: “The dynamic global image of our time is not the so-called clash of civilisations but the marbling of civilisations and peoples. Just as the end of the Cold War brought about a new geopolitical situation, the global movements of people has brought about a georeligious reality.” (Eck, 2001, p. 4)

Since September 11, 2001, the world has become increasingly aware and sensitive to the presence of the religious other. This is not to say that interfaith and multicultural encounters are new in Australia, or the global context for that matter. According to Kwok Pui Lan this pluralistic condition has brought about a shift in focus whereby “... the question for Western Christians is no longer how to missionize non-believers in far way lands, but how to live among religious neighbours whose children go to the same schools as theirs.” (Pui-Lan, 2005, p. 536)



The implications for the church and theological education will be in the way it understands and goes about God's mission in this pluralistic context and how theologically adept it is in accounting for its own witness in the presence of the religious other in the public space. In January (17-21) a course on Interfaith Dialogue was offered as an intensive at UTC. It was the second time this subject was offered at the college, although the first time it was offered as an Intensive. It drew an enrolment of 11 students, six of whom were candidates for ministry. In essence the objective of the course was to integrate the theory and practice of interfaith dialogue.

Interfaith dialogue is essentially about relationships with the broader vision of bringing about transformative changes in our own part of the world through collaborative interfaith action made possible by deeper understanding of each other's faith. As dialogue has to do with encounters and relationships it is imperative that learning is extended outside the lecture room. It is a mistake, I believe, to assume that interfaith is only about dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is one aspect of interfaith relationships. Dialogue is relational. As Alan Race puts it: "... taking other religions seriously arises from critical thinking in religious understanding. That is to say, it arises because we recognize that to welcome another religious human being is also to welcome the religion which has shaped them." (Race & Hedges, 2008, p. 6)

This course explored five of the world's faith traditions. These were Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. Learning about these faiths comprised reading about them through a text, through face-to-face encounters with scholars from these traditions and visiting their places of worship. The aim of these encounters was to enable students to appropriate what they read about other faiths with the reality of how these faiths are practised on a day-to-day basis.

A second aspect of the course was to demonstrate how interfaith dialogue is practised at both an informal and formal level. A panel of interfaith practitioners was brought together for a conversation on "The challenges and possibilities of interfaith dialogue". The panelists reflected on the meaning of interfaith dialogue, its purpose, challenges and possibilities. Similarly, a panel of Christian interfaith practitioners was brought together to reflect on the challenges they faced in interfaith dialogue both theologically and in practice.

Finally, students were encouraged to engage theologically and critically with the Christian tradition and its approaches to other faiths in order that they may continue to think theologically and act collaboratively, wherever they are. It has been the case across the various faith traditions that the practice of interfaith dialogue has often superseded theological reflection. This gap needs to be addressed. It is imperative that dialogue is sustained by theological reflection.

On the whole it was, I believe, a very worthwhile week of learning, meaningful encounters and critical evaluation of our theological approaches to other faiths. I would also hope it has begun a journey of questioning our assumed superiority over other faiths. ✚

References:

Eck, D. L. (2001). *A new religious America: how a "Christian country" has become the world's most religiously diverse country*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Pui-Lan, K. (2005). *Interfaith encounter*. In A. Holder (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.

Race, A., & Hedges, P. (Eds.). (2008). *Christian approaches to other faiths*. London: SCM Press.



HINDU GUEST LECTURER-MATAJI (LEFT) PHOTO: RALPH CARROLL

“What an eye-opening week of learning and growing occurred, as we ventured into the intensive Inter-faith Dialogue course. Our ears became more attuned, as we carefully listened to the hearts of the men and women of different faiths. We had very comprehensive lectures, panels and excursions to the various places of worship. What stood out was the unity that is developing between different faiths and cultures. ‘How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity’ (Psalm 133:1). My personal, media-driven misunderstandings were broken, and a new love of our fellow man/woman emerged, regardless of their background and beliefs. We were all greatly impressed with the foundations and ongoing dialogue that is happening. I am convinced that the education and approach Sef and her team are using will make a huge impact on the multi-cultural areas we all live in.” Helen Reardon