

Multicultural Australia: Its Links With Multifaith Australia
JCMA Annual General Meeting

By Sir James Gobbo
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A few weeks ago a major piece of research entitled “Mapping Social Cohesion” was released. It was carried out by Professor Andrew Markus of Monash University and was sponsored by the Scanlon Foundation. Also involved was the Australian Multicultural Foundation which I have the honour to Chair.

One of the most interesting findings of the Report based on national surveys was that 84% of those surveyed agreed that ‘multiculturalism had been good for Australia’. This is the highest level of support ever in regular polling.

The Report recites

More than seven out of ten respondents agreed that multiculturalism ‘benefits the economic development of Australia’ (75%) and ‘encourages immigrants to become part of Australian society’ (71%). Close to six out of ten respondents agreed that multiculturalism strengthens the Australian way of life (60%) and gives immigrants the same opportunities as the Australian born (58%).¹

All this is gratifying for those who favour the concept of a Multicultural Australia. But tonight’s audience, which would no doubt be pleased with these findings, would hope that the findings carry over to support for a multifaith Australia.

Yet there is no express link made between a multicultural Australia and a multifaith Australia. I hasten to say I am not being critical of the Monash Report. On the contrary, the

¹ Professor Andrew Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2013: National Report 2013*, (Monash University: Scanlon Foundation, 2013), p. 34.

surveys and polls on the subject of Multiculturalism over decades do not link multiculturalism questions with religion.

Some of you might ask – but surely a multicultural Australia means a multifaith Australia? You might also say does not cultural diversity include religious diversity? To answer these very pertinent questions I will adopt a twofold approach. I will first look – as concisely as possible – at how, in the development of the concept of a multicultural Australia, religion has for the most part never featured and secondly, I will review how religion has made a vital contribution to the development of a multicultural Australia.

Consider first the story of the discussions and texts on Multiculturalism. In the publications on immigration, in particular on multiculturalism in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, religion was seldom if ever mentioned. Let me give some examples. Before I do so may I confess at the outset that I too failed to expressly spell out the link in most of this period.

A Report of Culture to advise on Australia's Immigration Policies in 1988 contains 1000 pages of Consultants' Reports. Not one mentioned religion.

Multiculturalism for all Australians and National Consultations on Multiculturalism and Citizenship. Both were published in 1982 and both were prepared by the Council of Population and Ethnic Affairs including Professor G. Zubrigski.

The text '*Australian Multiculturalism*' by Lois Foster and David Stockley published in 1988 did not link culture and religion, though there is a valuable chapter on 'The Church'.

National Agenda, 1989. Though there are several references to religion, these are usually in the context of freedom of religion. They do not make the link between culture and religion.

The Challenge of Diversity, 1989. (Policy Options for a Multicultural Australia), edited by James Jupp. Contents includes: Youth, Education, Employment, Health and the

Law. No mention of religion or faith or churches in Index, much less in the Table of Contents.

The Oxford University Press 1995 publication '*Bold Experiment: A Documentary History of Australian Immigration since 1995*' by John Lack and Jacqueline Templeton had no material on religious pluralism or its connection to Multiculturalism. Religion or Churches are not mentioned in the Index.

Not until 1997 did public discussions of Multiculturalism expressly discuss Religion as an integral part of culture.

In 1997 the Australian Multicultural Foundation, of which I had been Chairman since 1989, finally had a major conference on the topic of Religion and Cultural Diversity. It was opened by the Governor General and had many distinguished international visitors.

All speakers made the point that by then was self-obvious, that the discussion of cultural diversity has to include of religious diversity. It was and is difficult to imagine any religious adherent saying his religion was not part of his culture?

In retrospect it is difficult to understand why it took until 1997 to publically make the connection between culture and religion. Perhaps there was a cringe on the part of faith communities.

It is here appropriate for me to move to the second main argument I foreshadowed at the outset, namely the role of religion and faith communities and institutions in the immigration story, including the development of the concept of a Multicultural Australia.

In my paper in 1997 I said this

The success story of Australia's large post-war immigration program and the progress towards an enlightened multicultural society – especially here in Vitoria –

have occurred not in spite of religious differences but in fact because of the positive contribution made by various faiths and their churches or groups or congregations.²

I went on to say

Religions – and the church or congregations or indigenous groups which are the living face of various faiths – have an enormous stake in a healthy multiculturalism and a healthy cultural diversity. A healthy multicultural society is built on true tolerance and respect for the rights and duties of others. If there is intolerance of cultural difference, there will be intolerance of religion. If people of faith cannot practice tolerance, then their faith will be impugned and will ultimately fail.³

We need to remind ourselves that again and again faith communities have played crucial roles in the progress to a Multicultural Australia. Two areas spring to mind welfare and education.

In migrants' welfare there was a very significant part played by religious bodies in assisting migrants in the settlement process.

The largest non-English speaking group of migrants in Australia was made up of migrants from Italy, the largest concentration being here in Melbourne. The heaviest period of movement was between 1947 and 1967. Throughout that period the main burden of assistance, which was both personalized and sensitive, fell on the shoulders of religious such as chaplains and their supporting lay groups. During those 20 years, CO.AS.IT., the official Italian welfare agency and the largest migrant welfare agency in Australia, did not exist and the main burden of providing assistance to Italians in their own language fell on the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief and on individual chaplains. As I was President of CO.AS.IT. for some twelve years in the 80s and 90s, I am happy to recognize the enormous contribution

² Sir James Gobbo, *Future Issues in Governing for Religion and Cultural Diversity*, Religion and Cultural Diversity Conference, delivered on Wednesday 30th July 1997, p. 3

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

of the Catholic Church to the successful settlement of Italian migrants in the two decades before CO.AS.IT. was formed.

What I have said of Italian settlers, also holds true in other communities. I refer in particular to the Jewish community, to the Greek community and to the Lutheran Church in the German community.

Another example is the great contribution made by the Ecumenical Migration Centre. That Centre evolved out of the European Australian Christian Fellowship, itself a product of the World Council of Churches.

In the field of education, an indispensable contribution was made by various religious bodies. In the early history of this country the Scots through the Presbyterian Church, for example, set up their own schools to preserve their faith and their culture.

When a whole new wave of cultures came to Australia in the post-war period, there was an urgent need to respond to what these groups regarded as their highest priority, along with employment, namely a culturally sensitive education for their children. Culturally sensitive meant recognizing the religion which was part and parcel of their culture. As a result, the Catholic Church was obliged to provide schooling for tens of thousands of migrant children without at that time any financial assistance from the State, a situation which continued until State aid to denominational schools was provided in the 1970s.

So both in welfare and education, religion was at the forefront in assisting newcomers to Australia. Moreover newcomers coming here in the post war period relied greatly on existing religious institutions to provide guidance. Government services did note the high need of migrants for wise advice of existing members of their background in particular, their religions.

It is important for faith adherents to stake a claim that faith is the most important ingredient in a Multicultural Australia and culture for most newcomers has always been that their culture is rooted in faith not in pizzas. It is also important to note that faith is linked to institutions and it is these which are at the core of a Multicultural Australia. Faith is not merely a personal experience; it is rooted in community and in communities served by institutions.

There is a misapprehension that faiths are monolithic as it were but in fact there is remarkable diversity within particular religions. I think from my own experience in the Italian community, I can give some simple examples of that. When Italian families went off to church on Palm Sunday as part of the Easter celebration period, it was supposed to be a celebration of great joy. The practice in the Australian Catholic churches was to distribute, not palms, but pieces of cypress. Now cypress in Italy is a tree that is planted around cemeteries and is a sign of death. And yet, baskets of cypress twigs were given out which caused some depression to Italians. That went on for years and years, and I think it is only in very recent times that Catholic churches have begun to actually give out pieces of palm leaves.

I remember also attending my early schools and coming home and my father would say to me in the Venetian dialect, What did you learn today, and I would say, nothing. He then said, How come, what did you do. I said, I marched. He said, you marched!, What march – I said, marching in preparation for St. Patrick's Day. He said, who is St. Patrick? All of these rehearsals for St. Patrick's Day seemed to occupy many days. It was something my father could never get used to, especially since one of the reasons we had left Italy may have been to get away from what he thought was an excess of fascist marches!⁴

As it remains only for me to return to my opening reference to the apparent surge in support for Multiculturalism, i.e. a multicultural Australia. For it is implicit in this that there is a surge in support for a multifaith Australia. Let us therefore take credit for all that our

⁴ Ibid., p. 4-6.

religious faiths and their adherents and institutions have contributed and are still contributing to the success of a Multicultural Australia.

I wish you well in the parts you all play in making for a better and holier Australia.