

# Canberra interfaith symposium 2013

**How Can My Spiritual Tradition Contribute to  
Community Partnership for the Future?**



*Hosted in conjunction with the National Multicultural Festival and  
supported by the ACT Government in Canberra on  
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CANBERRA INTERFAITH  
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### **Message from Senator Kate Lundy**

The Government's multicultural policy, *The People of Australia*, takes a whole-of-government approach to sustaining a socially cohesive and harmonious society for all Australians.

At the 2011 Census, the majority of Australians (some 68 per cent) professed a religious affiliation with more than 13 million Australians (about 61 per cent of our population) Christians, including Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Catholicism is now the largest single religion, with over 5.4 million Australians (25 per cent of our population) professing the Catholic faith.

At the same time, a growing number of Australians identify with a non-Christian faith. Referring again to the 2011 Census, the larger faith communities include almost 530 000 Buddhists, 476 000 Muslims, 276 000 Hindus, 97 000 Jews, 72 000 Sikhs and 14 000 Baha'i Australians.

Migration has changed both the face and faith of Australia. It has also made us a more cosmopolitan, outward looking and dynamic society.

Taking into account that 4.8 million Australians identify as having no religion, religious and interfaith issues still have an important role and relevance in informing policies and programs relating to multicultural Australia.

The future of our country is based on participation and inclusion. Greater religious conflict in the world has given rise to the need to promote interfaith dialogue and encourage mutual understanding and religious harmony. All great religions of the world share common values: human dignity, fairness and justice. These values are important building blocks for a successful multicultural community.

Interfaith activities like the one the Canberra Interfaith Forum recently hosted at the National Multicultural Festival provide good opportunities to highlight the commonalities between faiths, and in doing so, to address issues stemming from religious intolerance.

I would like to thank the Canberra Interfaith Forum for their continued hard work in building understanding, good will and a sense of community between people of different faiths. It is work such as this that enables us to enjoy such a vibrant and tolerant community.



***Message from Senator Gary Humphries***

An interfaith dialogue serves more purposes than simply growing cross-faith understanding. It should also remind our community that faith systems are as much a part of our mutual heritage as cultural systems.

In multicultural Australia, we take for granted the right of people to express their cultural identity and ancestry. Equally, we must accept that expressions of adherence to the great faith systems of the world are as much a part of belonging to a diverse community as expressions of cultural identity.

Faith has always played a key role in our history and our destiny. That fact does not change because a single faith system no longer dominates the spirituality of Australian as it once did.

I welcome and support a greater role for a dialogue about faith in the public affairs of our nation.



***Opening: Ms Joy Burch MLA, Minister for Multicultural Affairs***

I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. I acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

I would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event, including Mr Rod Little, Chairperson of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body.

I also want to acknowledge each and every one of you who are here today participating in this important event organised by the Canberra Interfaith Forum.

And, of course, I must thank the Canberra Interfaith Forum for organising this event.

The theme of this afternoon's Symposium 'How Can My Spiritual Tradition Contribute to Community Partnership for the Future' is very timely indeed.

I hope that many of you were able to experience the spirit of 'community partnership' on show throughout this weekend here at our very own National Multicultural Festival and that you will appreciate how the Festival is a shining and practical example of how all of

us will naturally and willingly allow ourselves to be drawn together when we have common needs and interests.

What will keep us drawn together is seeing for ourselves how those needs and interests are benefitting all of us now and into the future.

The morning session of this Forum with its multiple activities performed by the various spiritual faith groups shows the level of diversity that exists here within our local faith communities. I am sure that observers and fellow participants enjoyed the program and were enriched or even enlightened by the experience and the opportunity to share experiences.

I thank the eminent speakers who will be participating in this afternoon's session for sharing their wisdom and understanding and I acknowledge their leadership by their willingness to come together to discuss this important community issue.

I also thank the Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, Mr Rod Little, for his participation today. All of us, I am sure, can appreciate the intense spiritual and cultural connectedness that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have for this land and all that is in it.

I truly believe the work of any interfaith movement in this country will be enhanced by sharing with and learning from the spirituality and experiences of our First Australians and I hope that you will be inspired by Mr Little's discussion this afternoon.

I now formally declare this Interfaith Symposium 'Open'.

Thank you.

### **An Indigenous Perspective – *Mr Rod Little***

The First Peoples of Australia have many ceremonies, songs, rituals and dance similar to those displayed by groups this morning.

My peoples, right across this continent have practiced their rituals and ceremonies for more than 50,000 years. Our spirituality embraces the creation of all things from our lands, and all things are important to Aboriginal peoples. Some may refer to this as 'the Dreaming or Dreamtime'.

Being of the Amangu and Wajuk peoples in the west, I have been taught that respect and the valuing of our lands and waters; our sacred site; languages; dance and song are all a part of our spiritual beliefs and practices, our religion if you like.

These come from our moieties, our ways of cultural practices, our beliefs and spirituality and are still very strong today and are held in great value and pride. It is the survival of us as peoples.

Unfortunately, those present here today are not able to witness ceremonial practices of the local peoples, but I have witnessed them and can respect and acknowledge the differences. I am always impressed by the cultural differences of First Peoples of the world.

Within us all today are cultural and biological differences, our beliefs or religions may differ but there are some similarities, I encourage you to inquire, explore and educate yourselves as you invite others to share your faith.

I will share with you in the next few minutes my personal spiritual and cultural obligations. As a child I recall watching my father's people's dance ceremoniously to an important time of season, which happens to be around the end of the calendar year.

As I watched in awe, slightly afraid and at the same time proud, the men painted in red and white ochre they danced for the rains to cool the warming days and to flourish the summer bush foods from the natural environment.

They celebrated/rejoiced the growth of feed for the animals to feast on and would be healthy for hunting. They sang to express concerns and sat to discuss and resolve important business. Respect for each other's lands and waters; sacred sites; rules and disciplines; beliefs and cultural identity including languages, customs and kinships are guidance for us today.

These practices are still carried out in my family through the eldest who is a keeper of the knowledge and ceremonies for my families, particularly on my father's side. I close with respecting all here today.

### **Baha'i Presentation – *Dr Natalie Mobini***

I am a Baha'i, which means I belong to one of the world's younger spiritual traditions. The Baha'i Faith is an independent religion which began in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in Persia, and has now spread to virtually every country in the world. The first Baha'is came to Australia in 1920. Today we are a small but thriving community spread across the country, with members from many different backgrounds and walks of life.

Today I would like to present two key contributions that the Baha'i tradition can make to community partnership for the future. The first is the connection between worship and service to humanity; and the second is a vision of the oneness of religion.

In the Baha'i teachings, there are two primary purposes for which we were each created. The first is to strive to know and worship God, however we conceive of the transcendent force in our lives. Worship of God, prayer and meditation are important to orient ourselves towards the Divine and remind us of our true nature, which is fundamentally spiritual.

But worship alone is not enough. It needs to be accompanied by service to our fellow human beings: playing our part, however modest, in the advancement of human civilisation. This is the second half of our twofold purpose. In fact there is an essential nexus between these two. Meeting the needs of the soul and those of society are reciprocal aspects of a mature spiritual life.

We see the connection between worship and service nicely captured in the program for this inter-faith forum. The morning was about worship, and we were treated to a wonderful demonstration of the many paths and forms there are to worship and devotion. The afternoon is about how we can serve together for the benefit of the community.

It's a very lofty idea – contributing to the betterment of society, serving humanity – but how do we go about it? The challenges facing us are vast: poverty, inequality, conflict, environmental destruction, to name only a few. I would venture that none of us has the complete blueprint for solving them. Our traditions have wisdom, profound truths and noble principles – but we need to learn how to apply them to today's challenges, in conjunction with the accumulating knowledge of science, and to consult on the questions that arise. Most importantly in today's world, we need to learn how to do this in partnership with one another.

It is here that I would offer a second contribution from the Baha'i Faith, and that is to recast the conception of religion in a way that offers the capacity to see ourselves as one, beyond all imagined categories of race, gender or indeed of religion itself.

We sit here today as people who have been divided into separate boxes: I'm the Baha'i, Gregor is the Christian, Ahmed is the Muslim, and so on... This is one way of describing the truth; we honour our religious traditions and they are very important to us. But I would like to propose an alternative conception in which, at the deepest level, there are not religions but Religion. We are coming together not as peoples but as the people of religion, writ large; the shared heirs to the religious heritage of humanity.

Can we not see religion as a single phenomenon, the ever-recurring encounters of our world with the world of God, however conceived? Could not each religion be regarded as a stage in the limitless unfolding of a single reality, beyond the ability of any of us to fully comprehend, whose purpose is the awakening of humankind to its capacities and responsibilities as the trustee of creation? And wouldn't such a vision assist us in achieving genuine unity and partnership in service to the well-being of humankind?

We all know the terrible damage that religious prejudice and sectarian hatreds have caused in human history, and they continue to burn in so many parts of the world today. This is the elephant in the room of our inter-faith gatherings. We need to be able to speak about this openly and honestly. We should not act as if it does not exist, or that appeals to mutual tolerance will be sufficient to combat it.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the central figures of my faith, spoke of the potential that could be achieved when we abide no lines of separation but regard all of humanity even as one family. "See ye no strangers," is His exhortation; "rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness." I humbly offer this vision as a contribution from the Baha'i community towards community partnership for the future.

### **Brahma Kumaris Presentation – *Ms Robyn Horton***

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University has just celebrated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its establishment. The theme for the celebrations was "One God, One Family". The essence of the teachings of Raja Yoga which are imparted by the Brahma Kumaris is that we, as spiritual beings, are all children of the one god. As a spiritual being, my innate and natural inner resources are peace, love and happiness. Through the practice of Raja Yoga meditation, we return our consciousness to its true, natural and original state. We are cultivating self-awareness. This experience of the self as spirit enables us to think pure and powerful thoughts and gain real peace of mind. Such thoughts are beneficial to our own well-being and bring a positive energy to those

around us. The world is a reflection of our thoughts. In order to change the world, and make it right, a world of peace and happiness, we need to change our consciousness.

The Brahma Kumaris exist to serve the global community offering people of all backgrounds an opportunity to deepen their understanding of themselves. The organisation is funded by voluntary donations, and our courses and classes are provided at no charge as a community service.

We are one family and we are brought together with one motivation – to serve. This awareness of unity brings so much joy. On my own, I can belong to God, and on my own, I can also have the motivation to serve but when it comes to serving one huge world, there is so much suffering that what can I do on my own? When it comes to the subject of service, God tells us that we all have to come together and serve in unity. When there are feelings of love, trust, and faith through understanding God, then we can come together and create a powerful gathering that is able to serve.

We now need to show the practical proof of the power of spirituality as a living reality in this world. The inner and outer environments are very much interconnected. Being balanced inside is related to how much love you have for others and being free from anger, worry, fear and greed.

Over the years, the Brahma Kumaris have undertaken world-wide programmes in partnership with the United Nations, in particular that peace begins with the individual.

In addition, we do believe that we need to live in harmony with nature, respecting it, and not using nature as a commodity, a resource for our own gain. To this end, we actively participate in international conferences on the environment and sustainability. In fact, last week, we participated in an international Conference on Sustainability in Japan. We are also currently involved in two community projects in India which are designed to give back to nature, allowing her to replenish and provide a sustainable, bio-diverse and abundant world.

The first of these is a solar energy project called India One. Together with the governments of India and Germany, other parties and the Brahma Kumaris, the research project currently uses a parabolic dish and features an innovative thermal storage for night operation. It will initially provide heat and power for 25,000 people at our nearby campus. The project is combining spirituality and values with research and development of renewable energy technology, and is aiming to have the design replicated in order to offer a cost effective, clean and decentralised alternative to conventional power generation. The Asian Development Bank Institute in Tokyo has recently referred to this project as ‘a successful public-private partnership towards climate change improvement’. They went on to say: ‘This is a good example of how a spiritual institution could be engaged in a strategic way in a grand coalition scenario involving private, national, and international government organisations to protect the environment.’

Another project involves Sustainable Yogic Agriculture. This initiative started in 2009 with a group of farmers in central and northern India in order to address the damage that climate change and human activity had been causing on the health and well being of families. It involves the practice of introducing systematic thought-based meditation at all stages of the crop cycle together with methods of traditional organic farming. The



research project is being undertaken in conjunction with two Indian universities and has already shown an increase in crop yield, crops with greater nutritional value and has reduced farmers' dependency on chemicals and associated debt.

The Brahma Kumaris continues to promote the need for a change in consciousness and the inclusion of spiritual practices in developing ecologically sound, socially viable and sustainable systems of agriculture.

In conclusion, we shouldn't think that if someone else starts I will follow. It is up to me to start acting generously now and continue doing it for others to see – then they will automatically start giving, too. Others will follow our example, creating a gathering of unity – a gathering that comes together with peace and love. Then, from whichever country we are from, in that country the wave of good work will spread. The world will witness the example of countries that are doing this much good. Is this possible? Of course! ***Om shanti - I am a peaceful soul***

### **Buddhist Presentation - Venerable Tenpa Bejanke**

“Our aim in Buddhist meditation and spiritual practice is to find the wholeness of life. Before we can bring peace to the family, the community, the nation, or the world, we must bring peace to ourselves” (Queen 2000). I recognise that as a Buddhist practitioner, I need to bring peace to myself so that I may be more self-aware when dealing with members of the community. To this end, I have cultivated the practices of meditation and mindfulness in order to bring compassion and kindness into my work, so as to be a more effective communicator as a pastoral carer in a hospital and hospice setting.

Having used these techniques, I believe that the Buddhist tools of meditation and mindfulness can work powerfully together to bring a more settled and reflective state of mind to the individual. It is a way of being fully present to every moment in our lives, as well as a systematic way of intentionally attending to our mind and body in a non-judgemental manner. Compassion and kindness towards oneself are intrinsically woven into the practice, so mindfulness practice can be seen as a wise and affectionate attention towards nurturing a more resilient self.

### ***Buddhism in Hospital and Hospice***

The practices of meditation and mindfulness have a proven track record of bringing benefit to a variety of communities. In the environs of the hospital and hospice, those patients who wish to do so are offered the opportunity to sit in silent or guided meditation in order to bring peace to the mind, in what can be a noisy, overwhelming and unfamiliar situation. The techniques of mindfulness can be practiced in order to relieve anxiety, as well as to bring understanding, some control and possible relief over any pain being experienced in their current situation.

### ***Buddhism and Mental Health***

Over time, the practice of mindfulness has come to be seen as a useful tool in the treatment of mental health. Those suffering from stress learn how to perceive it differently and then how to skilfully manage those stressful situations with a better appreciation of their own powers of coping. Recognising and dealing with stressful situations with awareness leads to better physical and emotional wellbeing. It is learning to come to terms with things as they are in order to optimise our potential. All of which,

has a flow-on effect in family, work and community participation and even the enjoyment of life.

### ***Buddhism and Prison***

Furthermore, Buddhism brings practical benefits to the prison population, through the visits of our Buddhist teachers and the supply of Dharma material for education. Prisoners learn mindfulness in order to cultivate wisdom and equanimity. These skills can be used in all areas of their life by helping to bring insight into their circumstances.

### ***Buddhism and its Temples***

There is an extensive involvement in a range of social welfare and educational activities by 96 per cent of Buddhist organisations. Ethnic and non-ethnic organisations, in the majority of cases, work well beyond their own cultural or ethnic communities. The ethnically based Buddhist organisations do at times double as welfare and cultural centres. The traditional temple building and environs help the migrant or those who have been displaced to remember the past as well as preserving the architecture, artwork and culture that defined a people. Therefore, as well as remembering the past, the temple is a launching pad for the future, providing support and confidence for new arrivals, a reassurance that they do not have to leave behind the best of their old ways as they learn the new. And I would like to acknowledge the Buddhist traditions of: Cambodia, China, Japan, Korea, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Taiwan, Tibet and Vietnam.

### ***Buddhism and Society***

So it can be seen that Buddhists have a willingness to participate in partnership with the local community; the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, Interfaith movements, human rights, the celebration of significant religious ceremonies, teachers, counsellors and chaplains. I recognise that Buddhism contributes to society the tools of meditation and mindfulness as well as the two pillars of wisdom and compassion. These practices and skills necessarily engage human well-being, both individually and socially, in a wide range of activities in the community, as well as further afield.

### ***Christian Presentation – Reverend Gregor Henderson***

Thank you. It's a privilege to participate in this Interfaith Forum as part of the Canberra Multicultural Festival.

Let me first acknowledge that we are meeting on Aboriginal land. I pay my respects to the Ngunnawal people, especially their elders past and present, who have cared for this land since time immemorial.

I want to make just five points this afternoon on the subject of "How can Christianity contribute to community partnership for the future".

1. Christians should always act with courtesy, respect and compassion for the whole of the Australian community, not least towards people of other faiths. We Christians believe that God loves every human being, no matter who they are or how they behave. We believe Jesus shows us this love of God, that no-one, absolutely no-one, is beneath God's care and love. Therefore Christians are impelled to live with respect for every human being, every section of society. Sadly, history tells us that Christians have not always acted in accordance with our beliefs – but living out our beliefs in this regard is a very important contribution to community partnership.

2. By ceasing to act as if we are always the dominant religion and should have the biggest say in religious affairs in Australia. While 61% of Australians profess to be Christians, according to the 2011 census, that figure has dropped from 73% in the past 25 years. At the same time, Australians who profess another religion have grown from a tiny 2% in 1986 to over 7% of the population now. We Christians need to be much more serious in our willingness to accept (not just tolerate) and co-operate with people of other faiths. One example would be the Christian service which is to be held tomorrow to mark the commencement of our ACT Legislative Assembly year – while I shall be present and shall participate, I would have preferred that it be an inter-faith event, where people of all faiths can participate in honouring and praying for our political leaders.
3. By ensuring that in our community services activities, we are open to serving everyone in the community, not just those who say they are Christian. Because we believe Jesus came to show us God's love for the whole of creation, for all of humanity, so the Christian churches' many facilities and services in areas like aged care, family support, men's sheds, emergency relief, must exist for the whole community. I'm pleased to say they do, that there is no discrimination against non-Christians in the great majority of our services, but we need always to ensure that remains the case.
4. By continuing to participate very positively in interfaith relationships, dialogue and co-operation across the world. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, which between them represent the vast majority of Christians in the world, are deeply involved in inter-faith relationships. Commitment to peaceful relationships across all faiths is a vital factor in facilitating peace in our world. We only have to think of countries like Syria, Egypt, the Sudan, Indonesia, China to realise the vital importance of positive inter-faith relationships for the future of the world.
5. And lastly, Christians can contribute to community partnership by always living out our core values of compassion, justice, peace-making and reconciliation. We have a very strong commitment to human rights, and despite our failings in many places and many times in the past, abiding by those core Christian values will provide a major contribution to community partnership for the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you today. May God continue to bless us all.

### **Hindu Presentation – Ms Jayanti Gupta**

Today I am going to talk about KARMA – which many in the west are familiar with. We say it in different ways: as we sow so shall we reap; cause and effect; and what goes around comes around. How does doing my duty of Karma help me in my community work?

There are three well understood forms of yoga namely, Bhakti yoga, Gnana yoga, and Karma yoga. Each is a path to the ultimate. Each focuses on a different aspect of human life and activity. These are paths that lead to the same goal. These are the different ways in which humans can devote themselves to the attainment of self-realisation and merger with the almighty. These are the paths that, in a manner of speaking, lead to salvation as defined by the Hindus.

What is yoga? Patanjali the great master formalised the science of yoga and defined it as “the cessation of the mind”. In the Hindu faith, yoga does not end with the mind but rather begins where the mind ends. Yoga is not just physical exercise. In fact, the physical exercise is only a supporting activity in the practice of yoga. Yoga is a spiritual practice leading to the realisation that we are spiritual beings undergoing human experience.

What does this mean? The aim of a Hindu life is to rise above the mundane existence into a super conscious state where the individual soul merges with the almighty or omnipresent. The practice of yoga, therefore, is designed to devote oneself completely to the attainment of that super conscious state through the principles of duty, right conduct and non-expectation of results.

The idea in Hinduism is to break the cycle of birth and death that results from the actions and conduct of an individual leading to a chain of cause and effect. Like the spaceship that must break the orbit of the earth in order to journey to its space destination, the soul must break the cycle or circle of birth and death in order to journey to its ultimate destination of discovery and merger with the almighty.

Let me focus on Karma yoga. What is Karma? Karma literally means ‘deed’ or ‘action’. It refers to everything that a person does. It includes all processes that go into a person’s decision to do something. The intention with which an action is taken, the desire for an expected outcome, and its impact on the object or person that receives the results of one’s action. This entire process contributes to a person’s experience in the present.

Hindu thought says that karma is a collection of unfulfilled experiences that stay in us and constantly pull us to fulfil them. Anything that we do and experience intensely and deeply will always leave our system. It will liberate us. The state of merger with the Supreme Being or the state of liberation from both joys and sorrows is a result of total fulfilment of the soul. In other words, it is the state where the soul does not need to do anything more as there is nothing left unfulfilled.

At the other end of this principle of karma is the notion that any action that leads to harm or is not ‘right’ creates a disturbance in the state of balance that the soul wishes to attain. As a result, in order to attain the balance once again, it must now or in the next birth, address the imbalance by a new series of actions that fulfil the soul by correcting the wrong.

Thus, activities that are consciously or unconsciously undertaken lead to results that either fulfil the Soul or create an imbalance that must be rectified. The Hindu philosophy is, therefore, that karma should be done consciously, it must do good generally and at least not cause any harm to any one, and must be undertaken without hoping for any particular results. The last of which, the Hindu says, is the prerogative of the almighty.

From that perspective, the practice of karma yoga or the performance of activities undertaken consciously, with an intense devotion towards doing good, enables me as a spiritual individual to move towards the ultimate aim of my being which is the almighty.

Now let us look at this principle as it can be put into day-to-day practice. As long as I am in human form and, as long as what I do impacts or can impact another life, then, every action on my part must be framed within the principle of 'doing no harm' and 'causing good' to those that are affected by me. What a beautiful way of looking at my actions!

With this principle there are a number of things that I do consciously. I think carefully about the results of my actions. I determine consciously what I can or must do in order that good may result from my actions. I do not expect rewards for what I do taking away the sting of non-recognition that can cause frustration and negative feelings and thoughts. I then enjoy what I do and contribute to the best of my abilities. All this leads to a complete, intense and exhaustive experience of what has been done. In turn, this leads to the fulfilment of my Soul.

Another way of looking at Karma is that we are in the present a totality of all our past decisions and actions. We will be in the future a totality of all our decisions and actions in the present. This is the continuum upon which the Soul glides from birth to birth until, eventually, it fulfils itself through intense experience. Therefore, in my community life and service in the present, I realise that my approach to it, my thoughts about it and my actions currently are because of what I am or have become due to my past. By consciously changing the way in which I think and act, I sow the seeds of correct and appropriate action that then removes the need for the Soul to find ways to fulfil the gaps in my spiritual experience. I perform consciously and reach the goal in a much shorter space of time than if my Soul would continue to perform unconsciously and take much longer to reach completion. This is not easy. The problem is that we as human beings take most of our decisions unconsciously. That is why we are unable to connect the cause with the effect. It takes a lot of effort, at least when one initially embarks on the practice of spirituality, to flood more awareness and intelligence into our thinking system and decision-making on our part. To change this way is to change fundamentally the nature of our being.

I wish to emphasise that everything in life is a choice we make. Karma is the totality of conscious choices. Therefore, in my spiritual practice I choose to make conscious choices which, in turn, allow me to become the instrument of good and at the same time fulfil my Soul. Needless to say, that allows me to contribute meaningfully to my community activities in the future.

### **Jewish Presentation – Ms Simcha Udwin**

Can you imagine what a wondrous world we would live in, when what is most valued is kindness and gentleness, when we see each other all as sacred, and recognise and work toward what we can create with the awesome talents and powers we are given? This is not a dream invented in the 1960s - it is a basic, universal core of religion that has underwritten the rise of modern democracy and the prosperity we enjoy today. It will inspire an ever improving world as it always has. These are the progressive values Martin Luther King reminded us of in his famous "I have a dream" speech and that were the impetus for giving us a world in 2013 that we did not have in 1963. With the developments of the last few hundred years toward that recognition of equality and rights for all that have been built on traditional progressive values - not an oxymoron but a fact, as I will show - I have hope for great things as we join hands together to better our world.

2013 is the Jewish year 5,773. Judaism's teachings about justice, sanctity of life, the search for truth (including education) and love of humanity are universal, and are fundamental to civilisation. When we consider to what extent human rights, animal welfare and the health of our planet are taken seriously today, let us be encouraged by the light of universal ancient wisdom and experience we are benefitting from today.

Judaism calls on us all to partner with each other to make a better world for the greatest reason of all: because humankind, says the first chapter of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, was not only made by God. Humans are made in the likeness of God. Think of that awesome concept for a moment. It speaks of the value of each individual and the equality of all people. Every single person in the world is born with untold potential. Every single person is born with a sacred soul and mind. The Divine is expressed through each of us. To serve the wellbeing of others is to serve God. From this central value, the supporting values of civilisation flow.

Being made in the likeness of God means we each have incredible power to create or destroy. A central teaching of Judaism is that human actions determine our destiny and whether the world is a heaven, a hell or somewhere in between. Each person has God-given talents and it is their responsibility to use them to help others reach their God-given potential for good.

The Adam and Eve creation story then teaches that we are all related as one human family.

### ***Social and economic justice***

Judaism imposes many obligations of moral behaviour, in a hierarchy of importance. The most important obligation we have is to save lives. One can break all commandments in Judaism but three, to save a life. In many countries around the world, including ours, it is not illegal to "not get involved" to save another's life if we can. The Bible commands, "Do not stand idly by while your brother's blood is being spilled". This principle extends to all forms of suffering, not just life-threatening situations.

The poorest and most isolated have the highest priority to receive our help. The Bible continually stresses the particular support of the poor who are widowed, orphaned, or strangers to the community.

In Judaism, charity is not a favour one does another: it is a matter of justice and obligation. In Hebrew, just as in Arabic as Jews and Arabs are cousins, the word for charity is the same word as justice or truth. In Hebrew, charity = Tzedakah; Tzedek = Justice/truth | In Arabic charity = sadaka; from sedek (truth). In Hebrew, a righteous person is a "tzadik". In Arabic, a righteous person is a "sadiq".

The Bible commands one to vigorously pursue truth, which, again, is a form of justice and charity. Judaism obligates to educate ourselves and others, as education has the power to change the world for good. It is not only kindness but truth that matters, because to be kind without truth is to be ineffective or worse. Because of Jews' premium on education, Jews have long been known as the "People of the Book". In medieval times, when most people were illiterate, Jews would educate their sons and their daughters if they could afford it too, and pay for the upkeep of the local school. The most famous Jewish Biblical commentator, a rabbi who was a winemaker in medieval France, had three daughters

who were scholars in their own right and were treated as equals to the leading male scholars of their generation.

It often surprises people that Jews are very small in number - we're 0.2% of Australia's and the world's population (although far more people have Jewish ancestry). There are less than 14 million Jews in world. Yet Jews are overrepresented in fields like medicine, law and science. There have been about 850 Nobel Prize winners; 177 have been Jewish. Most of these Nobel Prize winners were in fact secular Jews. The insight that cultural values from religion give to science - including the search for truth, and the confidence placed in each person to achieve incredible things, and others that I have not mentioned is for another speech.

What do you think Judaism says is the best way of giving charity? Answer: there are two! 1) Giving a person a livelihood so they can live in dignity and self-determination. 2) If you can't, then give in secret, so that the receiver does not need to cope with the humiliation of dealing with the giver.

In today's times, we should support a just system of governance where people in hard circumstances they are doing their best to overcome have a RIGHT to support, as we do in Australia with Centrelink, public education and the HELP scheme for uni. Our system here is just and enlightened, especially compared to the condition of many around the world who are forced to beg for their sustenance. It is a religious duty to pay taxes to provide for each others' material and spiritual welfare. In ancient Israel, there were such taxes: the taxes were tithes of 10 per cent of one's income. From then, until now, in addition to paying taxes, Jews have contributed 10 per cent of their income to charity as an ongoing religious obligation, contributing to vibrant communal life and organisations through the ages.

These lessons come down to another central Jewish concept of Tikkun olam - "repairing the world".

Jews are overrepresented in social causes. For example, Jews were vastly overrepresented in the civil rights movement and labour movement in the US. Famous Jews who have contributed to society include Sir John Monash - commander-in-chief of the Australian army during World War I; Albert Einstein (who was also a pacifist). I should add that both were ardent Zionists, who worked to secure the revival of the Jewish state in its ancestral homeland after two millennia of its rule by distant empires.

Judaism finally teaches that we should judge people and choose leaders, not on material success, physical appeal, charm or a sharp wit, but based on their demonstrated caring for others, especially for animals. The great Jewish leaders - Moses the prophet, who led the Children of Israel from slavery to the Land of Israel, and King David - were shepherds chosen by God, because, God said, if they could care so tenderly for defenceless animals they had the character to care for people. Kindness and gentleness are the key determinant of a leader because they are the most important things one can be and because God is love (another topic for another speech!). God's voice, the Bible says, is a small still voice yet it has the power to shatter mountains. Let us see that divine power in ourselves so that we can make that heaven on earth. It is within our hands.

## **Muslim Presentation - Ahmed Youssef**

The primary question is addressed below from an Islamic perspective. In doing this, each of a Muslim's primary obligations are examined with a view to illustrating how these obligations individually and collectively contribute to the broader question.

The Quran ordains that 'Matters of judgment with respect to an individual's religious belief or conviction is solely in God's realm.' God alone will judge and God alone is competent to do so and will deal with these issues. Human beings (and particularly those who accept the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed) are instructed not to venture into this domain and Muslims are specifically dissuaded from passing judgment on these matters.

The canonical prayers prescribed in the Muslim faith, requiring a Muslim to pray at five set times during the day, is a constant reminder of God's presence and if performed with devotion and presence of mind should dissuade the person from committing or even approaching the major 'sins'.

A Muslim is required to pay a percentage of his or her wealth to the needy; to tithe or to pay the poor rate, regularly. An annual minimum in 'charity' is mandated in Islam along with an exhortation to Muslims to give as much as possible to those who are in need, irrespective of their religious affiliation or otherwise.

A Muslim (whose health permits this) is required to fast in the lunar month of Ramadan. Fasting is a practical exercise of abstinence and of self-control. That is, if one is able to abstain from what is otherwise generally lawful (that is, permitted food and drink), then one should generally be able to abstain from what is forbidden or unlawful, acts described in the Muslim covenant that often relate to what is harmful to oneself and to others. One is reminded constantly to eat what is lawful and this includes how one earns one's living. It reminds a person to do a fair and honest day's work and to remember that one is answerable to God for how one earns and one spends one's wealth.

A Muslim, as part of his or her commitment to the faith, and if she or he is physically and financially able to do so, is required to undertake a pilgrimage (the *Hadj*). This is an act that is meant to be the culmination of one's acts of repentance.

A Muslim is not permitted to imbibe alcohol or other mind altering substances. Such avoidance enables one to keep one's reason and thoughts clear when dealing with others. It enables one to abstain from being involved in fights, brawls and accidents and in short helps one maintain one's dignity, good bearing and manners.

The Qur'an reminds a Muslim that the best of humankind is one who is most beneficial to humanity. It is meant to spur a Muslim to good deeds and action and to help reduce human misery and ignorance.

A Muslim should also view life as a passage to the Hereafter, a transient phase, to be lived fairly, wisely, honestly, charitably and with dignity. One should be cognisant that bad deeds and actions will gravely and adversely affect his or her life in the Hereafter. One should not sacrifice the transient for the Eternal.



So, should a Muslim live in accordance with what is summarised from the teachings of Islam above, one could surmise that our community would benefit, that there will be less want and that there will be less strife. Should a Muslim therefore live in accordance with the teachings of his or her faith, that spiritual tradition as argued above, can contribute positively to our community and to our collective well-being.

### **Presentation from Pagan Awareness Network: *Mr David Garland***

Thank you for the invitation. I am very happy to have been invited to participate in this Interfaith Forum as part of the Canberra Multicultural Festival.

Before we look to the future let us take a brief look back into the past.

We have managed as a species to make huge changes in the way that we relate to each other in relation to colour and race. Is it not time we work on the same change for the many faiths.

Many of the world's wars and conflicts have been caused because of differences in religion. In my opinion this is changing, and will continue to do so with the evolution of man. I believe Interfaith is something that is growing because of this evolution.

If we focus on what we have in common rather than what is different, as I believe many in the interfaith movement do, we will find we have a lot more in common to discuss. We are all human; we all bleed, and die without food and water. Why should our faiths divide us? Let me present a couple quotes:

One from Buddhism *"if the string too tight it will break. If the string too slack, it will not play."*

From the Christian Faiths - Matthew 7:12 – *"do unto others as you would have them do unto you."*

And one that many of you may not be aware of the Wiccan Rede, a religion that falls under the Pagan umbrella - Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfil – *"An' it harm none, Do as thou will."*

If we take away the Gods, break down all the rules and the teachings, and just look at what the core information is, between all religions, it is all about balance and being good to each other.

Something historically, we as human beings have not been too good at. One of the largest things we all have in common and something that, regardless of Religion, should be our goal is the planet.

For many Pagans the planet is sacred and a representation of the Mother Goddess, ensuring that the planet survives is not only a Spiritual goal but an essential one for our survival. For many Pagans, the world is our Church, our Temple, our Grove, sacred to many are the streams, the rivers and the fields. For some it can include restrictions to only eating the food that is grown locally and in season.

Many Pagans also believe in Karma, where what you do will return to you, as well as if you take you should give.

If all of us as spiritual people, of many faiths, participate in the community together it will benefit everyone. If we can as people, simply respect another's choice of religion and work together for a common goal, there will be so much more we can achieve.

I believe that the interfaith movement will be the primary facilitator of this. Rather than just looking after our own, if we can look after all, so much more can be done.

This is something that will take time to evolve as there are centuries of division to overcome, but as is evident here today, we have 13 faiths represented, who are interested in working together for a common goal, that goal is each and every one of us as people.

In summary, I would like for all of us, as members of different Religious groups to change how we think, and become a united community who each have our own religions.

### **Presentation from Quakers – Ms Shobha Varkey**

“Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you” *George Fox 1656*.

The basic Quaker understanding of faith is that we seek to live in the spirit of love, truth and peace. The testimonies express our commitment to that approach. The testimonies do not exist in a rigid written form, and not imposed. They help us in our search for an authentic response to the challenges we face in life.

Early Quakers had testimonies about outward symbols, taking oaths, and the payment of tithes, about peace, temperance, moderation and forms of address. Later, testimonies evolved around slavery, integrity in business, capital punishment and prison reform, nonviolence and conscientious objection to military service.

The testimonies are the result of the leadings of the Spirit and the interaction between faith and action. The testimonies usually highlighted today are:

**SIMPLICITY.** We seek to resist dependence on material security, and to use what we have in the service of others.

**PEACE.** We seek to live in that life and power that takes away the occasion of war. We are into prevention as well as cure – locally, nationally, internationally.

**INTEGRITY.** We seek to be honest and truthful in our dealings, to have an alignment of inner spiritual harmony and outward behavior.

**COMMUNITY.** We seek to build a shared sense of mutual learning and living, to support each other on our journey.

**EQUALITY.** We recognise the equality of all in the Spirit. Our organisation reflects this, with no formal hierarchy. We have strong concern about inequity and exploitation, and are active in working for social inclusion.

To these we can add an emerging testimony on the earth and the environment. We seek to treasure the earth and preserve its capacity to sustain us. This involves care for what we leave to future generations.

The overall impact of the Testimonies is a commitment to building a society that is based on meeting real human spiritual needs, reduced inequalities, living in an environmentally sustainable manner and building peace in our society.

### **Sathya Sai Presentation - *Dr. Mohan Bhullar***

The Sathya Sai Organisation is a spiritual organisation that is open to anyone from any religious group,; and we have members who are Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Taoists and others.

In the words of its founder Sri Sathya Sai Baba: "Let the different faiths exist, let them flourish, and let the glory of God be sung in all the languages and a variety of tunes. That should be the ideal." We accept the Principle of "The Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of man". We believe all beings have the Divine spark in them and should be treated accordingly with **love** and **respect**.

Spiritual endeavour gives meaning to life, and for this, character is necessary; a good character with qualities like love, patience, forbearance, compassion and charity.

Human Values such as Truth, Love, Peace, Right Conduct and Non-Violence are timeless and can be found in the teachings and sacred writings of every major religion, and selfless service is a basic tenet in all of them. Values are the very foundations of character.

LOVE features most prominently in all the sacred teachings. It is in fact the undercurrent of all the other human values.

The Golden Rule is a fine example that is common in all the scriptures. All the teachings urge us to be good, honest, truthful, loving, peaceful, and to live in harmony with our fellow human beings and with the environment.

We can no longer live in isolation and do what we like. The law of Karma will see that we reap what we have sown. And we are seeing the results in climate changes, as well as in environmental disasters and financial turmoil.

The practice of the five Human Values of Truth, Right Conduct, Peace, Love and Non-Violence is one of the foundations of the Sathya Sai Organisation. It can bring about remarkable changes for the better in every aspect of our lives. We can bring about these changes by instituting Human Values programs at the Community level and in our Schools.

At our centres we have a three-fold approach:

1. **Spiritual** activities involving devotional singing, prayers, study groups and meditation.
2. **Educational** programs teaching Human Values to children, and by the study of appropriate literature.
3. **Service** activities providing help for the needy (this can be in the form of food, clothing, money) blood donations, Medical teams sent to Fiji and Sri Lanka, tree-planting and many more.

*“Hands that serve are holier than lips that pray”. – Sathya Sai Baba.*

We are aware that there are many schools in the public and private sector teaching values in some form or other. It is only by teaching values to our young children that they will grow up to be good, law-abiding citizens living in peace and harmony in the community.

The Sathya Sai Organisation has established a primary school in Murwillumbah in north NSW. The unique feature of the Sathya Sai School is the integration of the **five Human Values with the State curriculum**. They appear simple and straightforward. However, they are the visible aspects of a beautiful and rich philosophy of life, that proclaims that the entire creation, of which we are a part, is a manifestation of Oneness. These Human Values are expressions of a fundamental interconnection that every individual has at any given moment with everything and everyone. The school is open to all and it is free.

Together with Education in Human Values, parents too have to share the responsibility of teaching their children right from wrong and practising these values themselves. We have programs for parents as well. The end result of such education is Good Character, which is essential for a harmonious Community Partnership for the Future of Australia.

### **Sikh Presentation – Mr Amardeep Singh**

It is not very difficult to get confused between spiritual traditions and spirituality where the spiritual traditions are just a reflection of one’s religion and are a pathway for our consciousness to reach the destination of spirituality. True religion is an art of living and has many facets. Religions were created to inspire and guide the inner consciousness of man and to transform it: from animality to humanity; from humanity to nobility; from nobility to spirituality; and from spirituality to the state of oneness with God.

If religion does not transform our consciousness and make a better and nobler man of us, then the adoption and profession of religion becomes: hypocritical; superfluous; and meaningless.

The religion I belong to is Sikhism which was initiated in 1469 by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The traditions and philosophy of Sikhism were established by ten gurus from 1469 to 1708. Each guru added and reinforced the message taught by the previous Gurus, resulting in the creation of the Sikh religion. Hymns written by the Gurus constitute the holy book for Sikhs i.e. Sri Guru Granth Sahib delivering the pathway to live a purposeful life and submerge within the creator’s spirit.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism, not only travelled over 50,000 miles across the world delivering the message of universal brotherhood but also lived that way

himself until his last breath. In Japji Sahib (Morning prayer of Sikhs ) he advised us to attune ourselves to God's sweet will.

It is this concept of universal religion that sums up the essence of religions giving us a simple motto of life "LOVE FOR ALL, MALICE TOWARDS NONE" as also explained in guru Granth sahib, "MAN APNE TEY BRA MITANA PEKHE SAGAL SRISHT SAJNA".

The knowledge of the Divine Realm can only be realised by the insight or Consciousness of our Souls, called 'Intuition', which is also called 'Third eye'. Without it the human is confused and remains bogged down in the maze of superfluous illusive and controversial religious ideologies and beliefs. Guru Nanak Dev Ji delivered the message of Universal Brotherhood by advocating simple spiritual practices, such as Kirat Karo, Naam Japo and Vand Chako.

**Kirat Karo** means earn an honest, pure and dedicated living by exercising one's skills, abilities and hard labour for the benefit of the individual, their family and society at large. **Naam Japo** refers to meditation, recite the name of God which helps our soul to cleanse itself from the contamination of Greed, Anger and Ego and establish a sense of connectivity with the almighty creator. **Vand Chhako** means share what you have and to consume it together as a community. This could be wealth, food. Knowledge, etc.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sikh Guru, Shri Guru Arjun Dev ji gave this tradition a more defined structure by guiding that all of his followers should contribute at least 10% of their honest earnings towards charity for the benefit of those, who are less privileged. This is probably the reason that Sikhs contribute 67% of total charities in India and 59000 Sikh Gurudwaras feed around 6 million people every day, free of charge in their community kitchen called Langar.

The Guru Granth Sahib delivers the message of Universal Religion in which no one is forced to give up their own religion. It emphasises the acceptance of all religions and imbibing Divine Virtues while practicing our own religious and spiritual traditions. According to Guru Nanak's view of religion.

1. A Muslim needs to be a true Muslim
2. A Hindu needs to be a true Hindu
3. A Christian needs to be a true Christian

Thus Sikhism preaches acceptance of other religions as a religious virtue to attain and apply the mandate that everyone has the right to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

With the application of the elements of Sikh Spiritual traditions, one can attain the Universal Religion of Love which is: *All-embracing, all-pervading, vibrating, living, unchanging, eternal and innate.*

### **Sukyo Mahikari Presentation – Mr Paul Taylor**

Sukyo Mahikari teaches, "the origin of the world and all people is one". Sukyo Mahikari aims to work with all people of the world collaboratively to establish a sustainable future for all humankind; to establish a way of life and a future direction that creates harmony between God, humans and nature.

Ever since the 'Industrial Revolution' at the end of the eighteenth century, humankind has been plundering nature at an accelerated rate. The unchecked advance of capitalism has brought us great technological convenience, but it has also polluted the environment and greatly disturbed the balance of nature. This is contaminating our bodies through the food and air we take in to sustain our lives. Chemical poisons are steadily weakening our bodies and causing incurable diseases.

Pollution of the physical realm isn't the only danger we face. We also face the even greater danger of pollution of the spiritual realm.

Kotama Okada, the founder of Sukyo Mahikari, taught that in 1962 we entered the period of the 'baptism by fire' predicted by the holy masters and sages of the past. He repeatedly warned that the predictions of the Buddha, Jesus and Nichiren would come true in our lifetime. He declared that, from the latter half of the twentieth century to the first half of the twenty-first century, humanity would experience the baptism by fire and undergo an unprecedented transformation.

Amongst many of his predictions from 1959 onwards, he predicted that intense local flooding would become common – we are beginning to experience this especially on the east coast of Australia in recent years.

Humankind is experiencing an increase in natural disasters and extreme weather phenomena, as well as economic, social and health crises. The pace at which these events are occurring is undoubtedly accelerating.

For example, the occurrence of earthquakes around the world, greater than 7.0 on the Richter scale, has increased from an average of 15 per year, to an average of 99 per year since 1997.

The Stockholm Resilience Centre has recently developed a scientific model to quantify the planetary boundaries or thresholds that mark the point at which humanity must take action to maintain the health of the earth's environment. The model shows that the earth has already exceeded three planetary thresholds in three areas: climate change, biodiversity loss, and the nitrogen cycle. This is a crisis that we cannot ignore.

It is estimated that by the year 2030 the burden placed on the environment will increase to two times the bio-capacity of the earth. There is a dire need to bring about an 'Environmental Revolution' similar to the 'Industrial Revolution' that took place in England in the eighteenth century. We need to make a great shift toward a new civilisation centred on safe renewable energy.

Germany has decided to shut down all its nuclear power plants by 2020. They have set themselves the lofty goal of achieving a one hundred percent shift to renewable energy. The Japanese government has also officially announced an innovative environmental strategy for energy, clearly stating its goal towards zero dependence on nuclear power by the 2030s.

The 'baptism by fire' era will affect people both through individual problems and also phenomena involving the whole earth and all humankind. It will include every conceivable form of disaster, both natural and man-made, both physical and spiritual. It is exactly what

we are now experiencing as our current materialistic civilisation collapses under the weight of its failings.

There is a path of spiritual wisdom that will enable us to mitigate and overcome the 'baptism by fire'. The founder described that path as a God-centred way of life with the practice of giving and receiving God's Light as its foundation.

The Light of God can eliminate more than just toxins in the natural environment. It can also purify our minds of negative thoughts such as grudges, jealousy and anger, and thus help change attitudes. It can even purify the human soul.

The practice of giving and receiving God's Light that is promoted through Sukyo Mahikari has a great power to cleanse away spiritual impurities, and also to cleanse our minds and bodies.

When we receive God's Light, disturbances caused by various spirits can begin to be resolved. As well, toxins in the body can be more easily discharged in the form of sweat and phlegm and so forth. People can become more and more vibrant and healthy, and therefore become more able to work hard on achieving their destinies in life and improving the quality of life for all people.

The practice of giving and receiving God's Light, the spiritual practice and tradition of Sukyo Mahikari, will help all people, regardless of faith, rediscover their divinity and purpose as human beings. We are here to create a heaven on earth.

We need to cooperate together to restore the balance of nature and lead lifestyles that are harmonised with nature. We urgently need to move towards renewable energy resources, and towards the principle of recycling resources and materials wherever possible. We need to help one another overcome the frequently occurring natural disasters that we will continue to face for some time.

As we unite across religious and ethnic boundaries and help each other overcome the difficulties of this age, I believe we will have real and enduring community partnership for the future.

### **Summation of Symposium Proceedings - Rev Ivan Roberts**

I wish to thank the members of the Canberra Interfaith Forum for the opportunity to conclude this afternoon's forum – *How Can My Spiritual Tradition Contribute to Community Partnership for the Future?* – and to summarise some of the insights that have come out of the presentations. I also wish to thank all the speakers for their contributions.

Although the ways we worship and express our understanding of the eternal mystery beyond us all varies, nonetheless there were a number of recurrent themes running through all the presentations this afternoon, I believe:

1. A sense there is one creator and that we find our own identity and unity with one another through our relationship with that one eternal source of life whom unites us all in the family of humanity.

2. This love and awareness of God – the Divine – or however we seek to name that eternal reality, cannot be separated from our relationships with one another and all creation.
3. Because this eternal source of life loves all humanity we therefore need to respect one another as we share life together in this world.
4. The eternal source of life has entrusted to us responsibility for the world we share.

### 1. ***One creator of all that is, uniting us in the family of humanity.***

Perhaps this was most clearly expressed by our representative from the ***Sukyo Mahikari*** tradition which teaches, “the origin of the world and all people is one”. But it was also present in the ***Indigenous Perspective*** and their representative who shared “our spirituality embraces the creation of all things from our lands, and all things are important to Aboriginal peoples.”

Underlying all the presentations was the understanding that our sense of unity, irrespective of our faith tradition, lies in the relationship we all have with a creative reality beyond the material world we know and calls us into relationship with one another in the family of humanity.

### 2. ***This love and awareness of God....***

A number of speakers sought to express how our worship or experience of the divine cannot be separated from our relationship with our neighbours and the world around us.

We learnt this afternoon “in the ***Baha’i*** teachings that there are two primary purposes for which we were each created. The first is to strive to know and worship God, however we conceive of the transcendent force in our lives. ...But worship alone is not enough. It needs to be accompanied by service to our fellow human beings: playing our part, however modest, in the advancement of human civilisation.”

This was reiterated by our ***Brahma Kumaris*** speaker reminding us we “need to show the practical proof of the power of spirituality as a living reality in this world. The inner and outer environments are very much interconnected.” Similarly ***Sikhism***, we discovered, teaches us, “if religion does not transform our consciousness and make a better and nobler (person) of us, then the adoption and profession of religion becomes: hypocritical, superfluous & meaningless”. This too was reflected in the insight offered by our ***Hindu*** representative who shared “every action on my part must be framed within the principle of ‘doing no harm’ and ‘causing good’ to those that are affected by me.”

In summary, our worship, loyalty and relationship with God needs to find practical expression in the way we live with one another and all creation in the one world we all share.

### 3. ***Need to respect one another as we share life together in this world***

This afternoon our ***Jewish*** speaker offered the awesome concept that “humans are made in the likeness of God”. And if that is the case then we too must love and respect our fellow human being. Similarly we were reminded today ***Christians*** believe that God loves every human being, no matter who they are or how they behave. Therefore Christians are impelled to live with respect for every human being, every section of society; though sadly, history tells us that Christians have not always acted in



accordance with those beliefs. Our representative from **Sathya Sai** also reminded us that the 'Golden Rule', of treating all people as we ourselves would wish to be treated, with equality and respect, is common to all scriptures.

#### 4. **Responsibility for the world we share.**

Our relationship with God is not only a blessing but also brings responsibility. One of the guiding principles for **Quakers** is a "strong concern about inequity and exploitation" seeking social inclusion. They also have a deep concern for the environment, entrusted to them, treasuring "the earth and preserving its capacity to sustain" all life for future generations. Similarly we learnt **Buddhism** also teaches responsibility for all of life and all creation and therefore members are keen to participate in partnership with other groups in the local community; such as the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, Interfaith movements, and all who are committed to human rights.

If I could sum up our presentations this afternoon in a couple of sentences it may be something like:

***If there is one creator of all that is, uniting us in the family of humanity, we cannot divorce our love and worship of that eternal reality from our relationships with one another and all creation. Because this eternal source of life loves all humanity we therefore need to respect one another as we work in partnership together in this world, which God has entrusted to us, for the well-being of those who will follow into the future.***

Let me conclude with words from the great Indian political reformer – Mahatma Gandhi – who once said: *"I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find God apart from the rest of humanity"*.

It is a profound reminder that our relationship with the divine will only be complete when we accept the inter-relatedness of all creation entrusted to us, and our responsibility to work together in partnership for the well-being of all.

#### **Vote of Thanks and Concluding Comments – Mr Harry Oppermann**

It is my pleasure to extend a sincere vote of thanks and appreciation to all the performers and speakers listed in our program and who contributed so wonderfully throughout the day; to all those who provided refreshments; to Mr Ross Andrews for technical production and to the ACT Multicultural Office for their support and facilitation; to Senator Gary Humphries for his words of welcome and support; to the Chairman of Canberra Interfaith Forum, Mr Dean Sahu Khan and all his executive; to Dr Vernon Bailey OAM, the driving force behind the Environment Meditation and Healing Garden adjacent to Clare Holland house; to Mr David Jenkins, the MC today (the Communications Secretary); Reverend Ivan Roberts for the summation; and last but not least CIF Coordinating Secretary, Willie Senanayake, the driving force behind this event.

We have been listening to a spirited and multifaceted discussion on a variety of important questions. We heard the fear by some, that they might be excluded. In conclusion I would like to touch on some of the points raised.

We have just had a discussion of monotheism.

*“I love the story of the devoted followers of a Hassidic Rabbi – they dared to ask the Rabbi: “ Does he believe that God created everything for a purpose?” He said that “of course he believed that God created everything for a purpose”.*

*They said: “in that case, why did God create atheists?”*

*And he replied “Because those who have faith sometimes make their peace with the injustices of this world by claiming that they are the will of God. Therefore God created atheists to protest and fight every injustice.” [i]*

2600 years ago there was an expert on how to contribute to community partnership and harmony – the theme of today’s colloquium – how to reconcile religious diversity and the public good.

***“His name was Jeremiah the Prophet and he was the first person to analyse the situation many find themselves in today, of being a minority, in a culture whose beliefs are not their own.”***

*Jeremiah wrote a letter to his Jewish exiles in Babylon in which he said: “Seek the welfare of the city to which you have gone and pray to God on its behalf, for in its peace and prosperity, you will find peace and prosperity”. He told them in effect:*

***“Maintain your identity while contributing to the common good. Be true to your faith while being a blessing to others regardless of their faith.” [ii]***

We need to be inclusive in our approach and choose words and concepts which unite us, and extend the very concept of community more widely to become inclusive to the maximum possible. There is a Biblical text concerning the protection of the stranger and the weak. The Rabbis explain that “nothing should be done to annoy or injure the stranger/alien, or even by word to offend their feelings”.

The German Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen, expounded on this saying:

***“This law of shielding the alien from all wrong is of vital significance in the history of religion. With it alone true Religion begins. The alien was to be protected, not because he was a member of one’s family, clan, religious community, or people; but because he was a human being. In the alien, therefore, humans discovered the idea of humanity.’***

Leviticus XIX 34 expressly demands in relation to the stranger: “ Thou shalt love him as thyself.”

There has been discussion at this forum of the role of the World Parliament of Religions. Here is a beautiful contribution from Hinduism on the protection of the alien and the nature of Religion, Swami Vivekananda said:

*“I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. “We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a country which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all countries of the earth.*

*I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny.*

*I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I remember having repeated a hymn from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings:*

*“As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, winding or straight, all lead to Thee.” [iii]*

We need to have a broad vision of the values of our common humanity – to look beyond the micro-community to the global community. We are taught that the highest form of compassion is that given for those who are beyond our family. [iv]

We must change our habit of “worrying about other people’s souls and our own stomachs.... and be more concerned with our own souls and other people’s stomachs” [v]

The German intellectual Goethe said, quoting Biblical teaching: ‘The deed and not (just) the word’. In our world today between 10 and 20 times as much money is spent on armaments as on food production. We must act on the precept “by our deeds shall we be known” and on the teaching that “redemption is brought about through daily acts of kindness/charity”. [vi]

One billion of our fellow humans go hungry every day. Two million children die each year from malnutrition – one every 14 seconds.

If our forum today on community is to have any meaning at all, then we must leave this meeting with the firm intention and resolve to give to whichever world charity helps alleviate this suffering; to include within our hearts and minds and actions, this suffering humanity. Only then can we say that we have gained an understanding of the true meaning of community partnership for the future – to be a blessing to one another.

Thank You,  
Harry Oppermann.

Postscript: “A concern for justice in a community should be, in critical part, a concern that its institutions encourage and enable us all to see, and in seeing... enable us all **to be responsive to the full humanity....in each of our fellow human beings.**” (Professor Raymond Gaita). [vii]

[i] Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks

[ii] Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks

[iii] Swami Vivekananda’s speeches, The World Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 11 September 1893

[iv] Maimonides/Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon/Musa ibn Maimun 1135-1204

[v] Rabbi Israel Salanter 1810-1883

[vi] Rabbi Hanina 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

[vii] The Values of a Common Humanity

## Environment Meditation and Healing Garden Project

We, the Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF), established this Garden in 2011 after four years of effort to:

- Symbolise our commitment to respect, protect and conserve the natural environment;
- Provide a venue where we could meet and meditate on and deepen our connection with the environment;
- Deepen our harmonious relationships and promote healing and reconciliation with each other (including the Indigenous community);
- Strengthen mutual bonds and understanding by working together on garden maintenance; and
- Provide a facility where visitors to the Hospice and volunteers working there can rest peacefully in nature.

This Garden is located on a one-hectare site just east of Clare Holland House in Menindee Drive, Barton, at the eastern extremity of Grevillea Park. In March 2011, some 250 trees and shrubs –Grevilleas, Bursarias and Correas, were planted in a horse-shoe-shaped garden-bed area. The Garden was formally launched by Ms Mary Porter MLA representing the Chief Minister in May 2011.

The 12 spiritual traditions comprising CIF are represented by 12 different varieties of Grevillea, forming the inner row of the garden-bed. In the surrounding grassland, outside the horse-shoe, we planted 12 Eucalypts blending with the adjacent wooded savannah. There is an inner grassland about 40-50 metres in diameter on which meetings are held periodically, on environmental, spiritual or multicultural issues. A plaque, listing the 12 spiritual traditions and 8 cooperating organisations, is placed at the upper side of the garden-bed.



**Youth Workshop of 14<sup>th</sup> May, 2013**



**A local Indigenous group visiting the Garden**

The Garden has been the site for several meetings of 100 or more CIF members and friends. A notable one was the celebration, in harmony, of the tenth anniversary of the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001.

On 13 April 2013, a workshop was held on the garden site for Youth groups of the various spiritual and multicultural traditions, to help them understand more of the environmental issues, express their views and ideas, and become engaged in maintaining the Garden and other environment-support action and activities. They enthusiastically planted 80 native ground-cover plants. A sizeable group of Indigenous people visited the Environment Garden on 5 May 2013.

We hope and expect the site will be used to symbolise and stimulate the awareness and concern of our own faith communities, and of the Canberra multicultural community in general, for environmental issues and sustainable living, as a contribution to the ACT Government's goals and targets along these lines,

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