

# Highlights of **G20 Interfaith Summit 2014: Economic Development and Religious Freedom**

The Summit was held November 16-18, 2014 on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia. The program, list and biographies of speakers, and other information about the summit are available at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/conference/g20-interfaith-summit>.

## **Freedom of Religion: Australia and Abroad**

Australia has a Human Rights Commission, including the office of a Freedom Commissioner who is involved with the issues of religious freedom. The government is overall secular and its role is not to advance religion, but to protect pluralism and freedom. There is, however, not a total separation of church and state in that the government funds religious schools and religious service providers.

Census shows that the majority have faith – mostly Christian; 27% are non-Christian which comprises 67% of recent immigrants. Only 20% are atheist.

Religious freedom is a complex subject including building of worship places, free expression in clothing, abortion, same-sex relationships, anti-discrimination laws in the market place and employment, providing services without compromising one's conscience, public funding and tax concessions, etc.

In a nutshell, people have to respect human rights of others to preserve their own. Human worth and dignity need to be respected – they derive from God. One way to do this is to give people religious freedom. Religious freedom is broad and deep involving beliefs, conscience and even identity, but not imposing one's beliefs on others. It is a universal, global, human rights issue and includes atheists and agnostics. We should all be able to think as we please without violence towards the beliefs of others. Fanaticism has to be kept in check.

Vigilance is needed for the erosion of religious freedom. The danger in any community is a closed mind and fear that their beliefs will be challenged. It is possible to be positively influenced without changing one's core beliefs. No one has monopoly on knowledge. "The mind is like a parachute, it only works when open."

Being religious in the present world means being inter-religious. Australia has in the last 30 years changed from an Anglo society to multi-ethnic and multi-religious one. It tries to promote trust and understanding of its ethnic and non-Christian communities through, for example, the Victoria Police Multi-faith Council. In a wider context, Australia is member of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP), the largest regional interfaith body representing half of humanity. (More details are at <http://www.religionsforpeaceasia.com/>)

Some claim that religion is a cause of problems or violence. This is true if adherents claim that their faith is the absolute truth and put down others or try to impose their beliefs on them. However, the above claim can also be scapegoating. Some of the best social changes were led by Christians or other believers, e.g., Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others. Great maturity is

needed to live peacefully with those of other beliefs. Where this is the case, societies do better economically. Violence is often the result of restricted freedoms.

## **Connections Between Religious Freedom and the Economy**

Overall there is a positive correlation between religious freedom and prosperity. For example, freedom to do missionary work led to missionaries promoting Bible reading, which resulted in printing and wider education, which in turn led to democratic principles and prosperity.

Business has a part in promoting religious freedom – but discrimination still exists. Overcoming religious tensions in work places leads to innovation and increased productivity. The Coca-Cola company managed to creatively bridge the division between India and Pakistan – see “Coca-Cola Small World Machines” video at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ts\\_4vOUDIImE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ts_4vOUDIImE).

Environment and climate are both economic and faith-related issues. Attitude to the environment should include the aspect of stewardship on behalf of a Higher Power and others, including future generations.

A study was done to determine the economic contribution of local congregations. It was found that over time, congregations raise the quality of life in their communities, including the social and economic level. Children grow into responsible adults. Other contributions include social services, suicide prevention, education through schools and day-care, social and cultural events, and spending, which in turn boosts the economy. Faith is a part of the solution – not the problem.

Believers may have special needs, but these should be accommodated because believers generally make good employees, who work hard and practice integrity and honesty – which means savings and profits to the employer and local economy.

Religious freedom fosters peace, stability and development. Development includes doing more and being more, not just having more. Religion often involves altruism, empathy, and sacrificing for others through charity. Worship attendance is related to generosity – donations, volunteering and helping others in health care, social crises or disaster relief.

Religious freedom in UAE means that expat workers are happy and will likely stay longer, which leads to more stability and productivity in work places. Personal spiritual growth as a result of freedom to worship also produces better employees and more productivity.

## **Religious Freedom in Various Countries**

Many countries lack religious freedom – citizens are imprisoned or executed often on bogus charges. IS (Islamic State) radicals practise a reign of terror against both non-Muslims and Muslims of different persuasion. The future for religious freedom looks bleak on the one hand, but this can change. Oppressors are struggling against and fearful of people power, internet, social media, and the globally developing higher consciousness. The struggle against injustice is hard, but mighty.

Freedom House is an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom around the world. Today, as more than two billion people live under oppressive rule, Freedom House speaks out against the main threats to democracy and empowers citizens to exercise their fundamental rights. They analyze the challenges to freedom; advocate for greater political and civil liberties; and support frontline activists to defend human rights and promote democratic change. Founded in 1941, Freedom House was the first American organization to champion the advancement of freedom globally. Website: <https://www.freedomhouse.org/about-us#.VHEsW4uUcs4>

Samoa is only 52 years old as a nation, but religion is the most powerful and influential aspect of life – the nation is founded on God. God’s guidance and blessings are invoked in government and elsewhere, and the country is stable, safe and prosperous.

New Zealand Maori population is still discriminated against and there is disparity between them and white Europeans. Maori Party leader MP Marama Fox shared how her party challenges discriminatory laws passed long ago. She believes that force and violence don’t accomplish any good thing, hearkening back to spiritual leader Te Whiti o Rongomai, who, like Mahatma Gandhi, promoted and practiced passive resistance to land confiscation by the colonists.

In Argentina, freedom of religion has contributed to a rapid economic development. Pope Francis has embraced those of other religions in a spirit of friendship. Creativity and initiative blossom in freedom. However, in a down economy, religious freedom is not enough. Peace, respect for nature, morality and other factors are also important.

In India, religion is on the increase and the governments supports this, including payment to Hindu priests. There is prosperity compared to other Asian nations. There is no dominant or official religion, and the government protects those that exist, including minority rights.

Norway had Lutheran state religion until two years ago when the state church was abolished. Since 1960, the society has changed from homogenous to diverse due to immigration and the presence of Catholics. Since 1998, there is Oslo Coalition for Religious Freedom promoting a new direction in Islamic thought, Orthodox thought, and others.

United Arab Emirates has an excellent policy toward ethnic and religious diversity and is a model of productive co-existence of diverse peoples. Its rulers support building of houses of worship and religious freedom for the 75% Muslims and 25% other believers. Two hundred nationalities and members of various faith groups live in peace and harmony and there is stability and economic prosperity. (Only one in five are native to UAE.) The present UAE leaders look up to the example and visionary leadership of the founder/father of UAE, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who in 1971 united the seven emirates and was appointed the first president. At that time the area was largely desert and lacked education, health care and infrastructure. (For a history summary, see <http://www.uae-embassy.org/uae/history/sheikh-zayed>) Sheikh Zayed is still admired for his wisdom, courage, loyalty, temperance, prudence and generosity. UAE residents practice universal virtues and strive for understanding and building bridges among those of various beliefs and cultures. Importance is placed on right actions and strength of families, so that future leaders are taught right values. Sanctity of beliefs, importance of human rights, and avoidance of promoting one ideology over another are practiced. Expats have commented that they have had more religious freedom in UAE than in their home country.

Respect rather than just tolerance should be practiced towards those of different faiths to ours – letting the other be other. Tolerance can be condescending, whereas respect involves trying to understand. Truth is relative to cultural environment. Threats and hostility should be outlawed, but robust discussion can be good. Religion and freedom of conscience includes a commitment and daily practice. However, a person's freedom must not encroach on the rights of others.

## **Interfaith Dialogue and Diapraxis**

### Problems and challenges worldwide – factors that hinder dialogue and bridge-building:

- 85% of people live on 15% global income
- Gender inequalities – including discrimination against and lack of education for women
- Discrimination against and abuse of children
- Economy sometimes transcending human wellbeing.
- Anti-religious rhetoric and extremism including fear and hate of others.
- Bad news culture and the biased picture often presented by the media – reporting needs to be questioned. The result of deliberately misleading reporting leads to becoming hostage to extremism, division, etc.
- Resistance to knowledge despite easy travel and unlimited information. The unknown is threatening, feared, demonized and fought. Fear and ignorance destroy civilizations.
- Radicalization and Islam phobia which tend to feed on each other. Often prejudice and ignorance lead to radical ideas and faulty bridges. Education is needed to prevent people from becoming radicalized.
- Fundamentalism and extremism lead to failure and pessimism. On the other hand, education is a force for positive relationships and new ways of thinking.
- Need for communication and building relationships in interfaith dialogue – this will increase cohesion.
- Concepts of *community* or *we* need to be expanded – despite differences and diversity, we are also part of something bigger, namely humans trying to worship God and serve humanity.
- Importance of accepting others as equals.
- Fruitful interfaith dialogue needs respect and understanding, not force or coercion. Human rights need to be included. It is a process starting with a need, followed by encounter, then curiosity, and finally respect and possible collaboration.

### Examples of Diapraxis – Building Bridges in Australia

Rev. Helen Summers, ordained interfaith minister, founded an Interfaith Centre in Melbourne. She has organized several events bringing people of diverse faiths and backgrounds together. These included an art exhibition featuring contemporary art of Muslim women, and poetry reading of 13<sup>th</sup> century poet Rumi, who is the most popular poet in the US. Various kinds of art are powerful at breaking down barriers.

Rev. Garth Reed began North Brisbane Interfaith Group for the purpose of promoting understanding and harmony among those of different religions. The goals and credo of the group are found at <http://www.interfaithinaction.org.au/our-story>.

Ms Di Hirsh is the organizer of Jewish-Moslem Conference for Women and has organized several conferences and retreats to build relationships and promote understanding of those with differing beliefs. Other activities include visits to schools, interfaith and intercultural dinners, and pilgrimages to holy sites (Bethlehem, Jerusalem).

In a nutshell, diapraxis involves friendship building. Theory is not enough, the proof is in the action.

Four principles for resolving problems through respect and seeking understanding:

1. Courage – to address the challenges.
2. Integrity – being true and transparent
3. Curiosity – asking questions
4. Humour – enjoying each other's stories and laughing together.

Historically, terrorism has always been around – yet no religion promotes terrorism. On the other hand, the Golden Rule is common to all religions and should be recovered for all aspects of life. The only way forward is through education, dialogue and cooperation. We serve God by serving others. Our small acts of kindness can go a long way – we may never know how far.

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