

# **ABRAHAM CONFERENCE**

SATURDAY 22 May , 2004  
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY  
115 VICTORIA PARADE  
EAST MELBOURNE

## **ABRAHAM LECTURE**

KEY NOTE SPEECH DELIVERED BY

**SIR JAMES GOBBO AC CVO**

FORMER GOVERNOR OF VICTORIA  
CHAIR, AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL  
FOUNDATION

It is an honour to be asked to give this address. The figure chosen to provide a title and an inspiration for this Conference is Abraham. It is an admirable choice for he is revered by the three great monotheistic faiths which have come together to present this Conference. Abraham is also apposite as a patron for a Conference the main context for which is the story of a society like Australia made up almost entirely of immigrants.

After consulting the *Historical Atlas of the Jewish People* I find that Abraham's migrations traversed many nations and exceeded those of the subsequent prophet Moses. Abraham has a particular timely relevance for me as in recent days, I attended the funeral service for a much loved Parish Priest. In an overflowing Cathedral, I recall vividly the beautiful final prayer which called on angels to lead him to Abraham's side.

We come together at a time when it can properly be said that there has never been a greater acceptance of the cultural diversity of our Australian society and a greater recognition of the many benefits of this diversity. Multiculturalism which is the philosophy which helps manage this diversity has substantial acceptance across the country. And yet there seems to be still embedded a reservation about diversity of religions and that religious differences are at the root of the conflicts and turmoil which daily fill our television screens with grim news and horrors. How has this come about? In the story of the development of multiculturalism since the migration boom which began in the 1950s, surely the beneficial role of religion and its contribution for good were frequently discussed and recognized? The contrary appears to be the case. How and why did this come about and what arguably are the possible consequences of this failure today. Lest you think that I am exaggerating, let me simply draw to your attention one simple fact. In all the many major conferences from the late 1960s onwards when multiculturalism was being discussed and formulated, no conference was ever held which discussed this topic in the primary context of religion. The first time that this occurred was in July 1997 when there took place in Melbourne a major Conference entitled Religion and Cultural Diversity; this Conference was arranged by the Australian Multicultural Foundation. There were of course many interfaith meetings but these were not held to see faith in the wider context of diversity. Rather they focussed on bridging interfaith differences. It was

only in the 1997 conference that it was squarely asked how can one talk of cultural diversity without talking of religion, for the cultures which our immigrants brought with them invariably had religion as their core.

Let us briefly review the story of the development of multiculturalism as we know it today and then we can return to this strange absence of the ongoing explicit nexus between religion and a successful culturally diverse society.

In the period of high immigration, namely in the 1950s and 1960s, there was little debate about what philosophy of settlement should apply in relation to our large intake of immigrants.

So far as Government was concerned, there was no statement of official policy - reasoned or otherwise - beyond that implicit in descriptions of the settlement process and to the pace of assimilation. As to the community, be it the newcomer or the host, there was negligible discussion until the late 1960s on policies relating to the preservation of culture and identity. Such discussion as did occur was generally confined to the particular issues of language teaching and welfare services.

There was, however, from an early stage, indeed as early as the 1950s, discussion in academic circles. Here, too, there was generally an assumption that assimilation was the appropriate approach. There was no uniformity in the use of the terms "assimilation" and "integration". It was said that "assimilation" involved eventual conformity at all social and cultural levels with the host society. Sometimes, this was associated with invisibility, that is to say, unrecognisability as a migrant.

The Australian Population and Immigration Council in its Green Paper "Immigration Policies and Australia's Population" 1977 wrote of the years 1947-1976, "... until quite recently there was an expectation in both Government and community that migrants should be assimilated as quickly as possible. The most desirable migrant was considered to be the one who was most nearly Australian".

F.D. Lewins, writing in 1987, describes the early academic work as follows:

“In the early 1950’s there was little evidence of any questioning of assimilation as a worthwhile concept and the term was employed liberally in the titles of many articles and monographs”.

Apart from academia and at what might be described at a political level, there was not a great deal of elaboration as to what was involved in assimilation. The index of success for individual migrants was related to the rapidity with which they made their way forward in economic terms and, more generally, to what extent they adopted what was seen as a typical Australian life-style. The public pronouncements were a combination of self-congratulation and reassurance of those who were dubious about the merits of bringing in such a high proportion of non-English speaking migrants. The main and regular forums for discussion were the annual Citizenship Conventions between 1950 and 1970. Dr James Darling, the famous Headmaster of Geelong Grammar School and later Sir James Darling, Chairman of the ABC, when addressing the Convention in 1959, warned participants against a policy of assimilation as opposed to seeking a new unity of old and new Australians and against any attempt to force newcomers into a pattern of Australia “as it used to be”. The Citizenship Conventions have been described as “carefully organised to avoid controversy”. The format of these meetings was not suited to the discussion of problems – however, by the late 1960’s some searching papers began to appear. The most significant of these were by Dr. Jerzy Zubrzycki of the Department of Sociology at the Australian National University.

By the late 1960’s there were increasing indications that any notion of rapid assimilation was a pipe dream and that there were very many migrants who had little knowledge of English and who were unlikely ever to become proficient in it. This was especially true of those women who remained at home. When large numbers of migrant women later joined the work force, it was often in settings where little knowledge of English was required.

Integration began to be preferred to assimilation as a term. There was no unanimity as to what integration meant any more than there was as to the meaning of assimilation. But it was intended to convey a process in which there was a measure of accommodation by the host society and in which the migrants were encouraged to

make their own recognisable contributions. The essential assumption in assimilation was that it was the migrant who had to be the subject of change. It may have been thought that retention of previous culture would be a private matter only, essentially related to family living. It was in this context that religion was mentioned and otherwise there was scarcely any discussion of the role of religion in the settlement process.

By the end of the 1960s there were many pressures to develop a coherent set of policies which, unlike previous assumptions such as assimilation, recognised the continuing cultural diversity of Australian society. Not only were the migrants of the 1950s and 1960s not becoming unrecognisably Australian, but there were new sources of migrants that made this goal ever more remote. As it was clear that Australia would always be a country of immigration, and as the variety of sources expanded, there would be continuing waves of ever more diverse cultures.

In this setting, there was an obvious need for a new philosophy for handling the diversity and for providing a set of principles for the provisions of settlement services for migrants. This need for a new philosophy was not to be properly met for nearly two decades, until the National Agenda of 1989. In the interval there were to be many discussions, debates and consultations. There was, however, considerable progress in the provision of services especially in education and welfare. Planning would have been earlier and more would probably have been achieved had there been greater intellectual rigour in the debates which occurred.

The starting point commonly accepted for term multiculturalism in Australia was its use by A.L. Grassby, Minister for Immigration in the Whitlam Government. In a paper entitled "A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future" delivered in Melbourne on August 11, 1973, Grassby spoke of an ethnic diversification of unparalleled dimensions. He referred to the three philosophies current in relation to large scale migration as the Anglo conformist view, the melting pot view and the concept of permanent ethnic pluralism "whereby each ethnic group desiring it is permitted to create its own communal life and preserve its own cultural heritage indefinitely, while taking part in the general life of the nation". Though he later adopted the substance of the pluralist approach he preferred to use the concept of "The Family of the Nation".

This was not to last and was supplanted by multiculturalism, a term which had been in common use in Canada for some years.

In 1989 after nearly twenty years of often confused debate and discussion, the newly created Council for Multicultural Affairs brought down a thoughtful statement of multiculturalism which was measured and moderate and which then drew bipartisan support. This statement adopted by the Hawke government came to be known as the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia. In the Discussion Paper which preceded the National Agenda, there was some discussion of the issue of religion but most space was given to issues such as access to services and language.

I note the following passages in the Discussion Paper:

“Although largely unquestioned in the past, freedom of religious practice and belief is now seen by some Australians as a cause for concern. A number of consultations noted not only expressions of hostility toward Muslims, but a continuing undercurrent of anti-Semitism.”

“Religious communities themselves could also promote understanding by examining the multicultural dimension of their own neighbourhood, the multifaith character of Australian society, and by encouraging such awareness in the general community. Multifaith conferences and seminars are becoming more common, as religious groups work towards promoting solutions to common concerns.

Ministries with immigrants and refugees can help to provide the basis for greater understanding of other cultures and beliefs. In the words of the Australian Council of Churches ‘the cornerstone of multiculturalism is that we are all created in God’s image.’”

In the National Agenda which followed this Paper, there was included freedom of religion as one of the basic freedoms to be respected but religion did not otherwise attract mention. This has been recently remedied in the revised National Agenda through the “Living in harmony” strategy prepared by the Council for Multicultural Australia which has carried on the good work of its predecessor.

Why was there so little reference to religion? As Chairman of the body which proposed the National Agenda, I offer the part explanation that we were more concerned with defining the essential ingredients of multiculturalism and its limits. Perhaps we thought it unnecessary to develop the topic of religion whilst there was in law and in practice freedom of religious practice.

Perhaps we were part of a continuing drift away from discussing religious issues publicly, reflecting what Archbishop Carnley Anglican Primate of Australia referred to this year as a tide of secularism which engulfed us in the past three decades. I should go on to say that Dr. Carnley expressed the view that the tide was now finally turning.

I hope that Archbishop Carnley proves to be correct. But sometimes the avoidance of express mention of religion where it is material and relevant is not entirely the fault of a secular, indifferent or even hostile world. It can be a self-imposed handicap.

Let us consider briefly the topic of volunteering – and its wider context of Social Capital. I have noted in the past how individuals engaged in volunteering work seldom link their work to their religion even though it is clear that this work has a religious context, for example, it is a parish activity.

I once had to address an ecumenical gathering to mark Volunteers Week. I spoke of the Apostles and the link between Christianity, charity and volunteer work. Before I spoke, a number of the volunteers spoke about their work and the satisfaction it gave them. None of them linked their work to their faith; none them linked voluntary work to Gospel values, even though this was a religious service in a church and some, if not all of those who spoke, were devout Christians of various denominations.

It is surprising that even on such an occasion, people felt compelled to avoid any reference to religion and to adopt a secular garb which merged into the general scene. I return again to the question why was religion neglected in the discussions on cultural diversity?

Perhaps there was a subconscious uneasiness about highlighting our religious diversity. The bitter sectarianism which sadly flourished in Australia right up to the almost mid-twentieth century had not entirely disappeared.

I hasten to say I had never been its victim. To the contrary. When I was 20 and in the last year of my history course at Melbourne University, then in 1951 still the only University in Victoria – I was encouraged to put myself forward for a Rhodes Scholarship. When I consulted one of my history lecturers he said to me – don't set your heart on it – no Catholic has ever won a Rhodes in Victoria. I was surprised because I thought he might have said that a conservative selection committee would be very unwilling to select the son of an Italian migrant. In the event a brave selection committee did choose me.

There was something of a sequel many years later in 1997 when I was appointed Governor of Victoria. I was the first Governor of a non-English speaking background ever appointed in Victoria and possibly in Australia. My Italian migrant background was noted by many but no-one noted that I was the first Catholic to be Governor of Victoria in its entire history.

To return to my main theme, one of the consequences of the limited discussions of the essential part of religion in cultural diversity was that religion, in particular the organized churches, did not receive due credit for their part in the successful settlement of so many immigrants.

The success story of Australia's large post-war immigration program and the progress towards an enlightened multicultural society - especially here in Victoria - have occurred not in spite of religious differences but in fact because of the positive contribution made by various faiths and their churches or religious groups and congregations.

Even before we look at the settlement process, religion through its churches and leaders had a critical role to play in stressing the need for respect for the traditions of each cultural group. It was and is also critical to the integrity of each faith that it publicly and consistently presses the virtues of genuine respect for the faith of others



and denounces religious extremists or fundamentalists as some call them. As His Eminence, Cardinal Arinze who attended the Conference on Religion and Cultural Diversity in Melbourne in 1997 said “Many of the major religions in the world have, or have had, religious extremists. Some are more violent than others. All of them are intolerant. The religious extremists, or fundamentalists as some call them, may be sincere and in good faith. But at the same time they are trampling on the rights of others. They are violating the principle of religious freedom which says that no one is to use force on another human being in matters of conscience, in matters religious. Religions - and the churches or congregations or indigenous groups which are the living face of various faiths - have an enormous stake in a healthy multiculturalism and a healthy cultural diversity. A healthy multicultural society is built on true tolerance and respect for the rights and duties of others. If there is intolerance of cultural difference, there will be intolerance of religion. If people of faith cannot practice tolerance, then their faith will be impugned and will ultimately fail.”

As to settlement, the contribution of religion to the success of our migration story is not difficult to illustrate. Two areas, namely welfare and education, spring to mind.

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

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

What I have said of Italian settlers, also holds true in other communities. I refer in particular to the Jewish community, to the Greek community and to the Lutheran Church in the German community. Another example is the great contribution made by the Ecumenical Migration Centre which began in 1967. That Centre evolved out of the European Australian Christian Fellowship, itself a product of the World Council of Churches.

Similarly Australia owes a great debt to its Muslim religious leaders for their part in the settlement process. The Turkish immigrants who came in such large numbers in the 1970s were mainly unskilled workers; they came from small towns and villages and lacked educated or professional leaders of the kind to be found in older well-established communities such as the Italian or Greek or Jewish communities. This critical leadership had to be provided by the Imans who were an important contribution to the successful settlement of so many Muslims.

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

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

There is a misapprehension that faiths are monolithic, but there is remarkable diversity within particular religions. I think from my own experience in the Italian community and I can give some simple examples of that. When Italian families went off to church on Palm Sunday as part of the Easter celebration period, it was supposed to be a celebration of great joy. The practice in the Australian Catholic churches was

to distribute, not palms, but pieces of cypress. Now cypress in Italy is a tree that is planted around cemeteries and is a sign of death. And yet, baskets of cypress twigs were given out which caused great depression to us Italians. That went on for years and years, and I think it is only in very recent times that Catholic churches have begun to actually give out pieces of palm leaves.

I remember also attending my early schools and coming home and my father would say to me in Italian, “What did you learn today”, and I would say, “Nothing”. He then said, “How come, what did you do?”. I said, “I marched” He said, “You marched!, What march?” I said, “marching in preparation for St. Patrick’s Day”. At the risk of offending any Irish present, I confess that my father then said, “Who is St. Patrick?” These rehearsals for St. Patrick’s Day seemed to occupy many days. It was something my father could never get used to, especially since we had left Italy to get away from what he thought was an excess of marches!

I am happy to say that in this matter of the study of religions and their varied and generally enriching influence in a multicultural Australia, there has in recent years been something of a sea change. Not only did we have in 1997 an entire international conference in Melbourne on Religion and Cultural Diversity, but this was followed up by a second such Conference in October 1999 in London again with the Australian Multicultural Foundation as the principal sponsor and with the support of the Federal Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Queensland Multicultural Affairs office. I am happy to say that it has just been confirmed that there will be a third such Conference in early March next year in Kolkata.

The Federal Department of Immigration last year funded a major research study on Religion and Cultural Diversity in Australia – a study which was proposed by The Australian Multicultural Foundation and which is due to be released by Minister Hardgrave in June this year. I have had the benefit of studying some interim findings in this Study which has been led by Professor Des Cahill and Professor Gary Bouma, both of whom are noted for their work in this area.

This new study found an increasing diversification of Religious Australia. The detailed case studies revealed an extraordinary vitality in this diversification. This

one case study was in Wattleton, a new dormitory suburb close to the periphery of a metropolitan area. The study discusses the case as follows:

“Aligned right beside each other in a short street of 100 metres was a Vietnamese monastery and temple, a Turkish mosque catering also for Muslims from China, Pakistan, India and Indonesia, and, right next door, a new Chinese Presbyterian Church.. Within a stone’s throw were a multicultural Baptist centre, a Lao Buddhist temple and a Khmer Buddhist temple. And within a remarkable square kilometer was a huge Chinese Buddhist complex with not only a major temple dedicated to the Buddha but other temples dedicated to Lao Tse and other gods. More conventionally, in the same area was an Anglican church which also hosted an evangelical Vietnamese Christian community and a large multicultural Roman Catholic parish.. Whilst the concentration of so many religious places of worship in one small area of suburbia is unusual, the trend is not. Not in areas where there significant numbers of recently arrived immigrants and refugees. Even in Jackaranda (CS7), a small isolated town of 4,000 people in remote Australia, the local Muslim community had constructed a mosque right on the town perimeter.”

The Research also examined the Contribution of Faith Communities to Social Capital and criticized the failure to acknowledge this contribution of Christianity since 1988. Later the Study lists numerous examples by Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities of the provision of schools, hospitals, homes, services and assistance, especially in regional and remote areas.

Another long term trend which the Research was revealing was a trend over three decades in a repositioning of the relationship between Religion and the State. Amongst the signs of this was the government funding of full time religious schools and the funding of religiously sponsored welfare agencies such as St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. This relationship was discussed as follows:

“By this interrelationship, faith communities are cultural in the sense of creating social capital for the social and economic well-being of Australia as

part of their commitment to the present and future of the nation and in the senses of maintaining and developing their faith community's cultural, linguistic and spiritual heritage down the generations and maintaining and developing its religious patrimony. In debating and heralding moral values, faith communities are also counter-cultural in pointing to and highlighting the wrong, misguided actions and false values both of governments and its institutions and of individuals, irrespective of their rank or status, in their lust for power, money, sex or whatever god. This is usually referred to as the prophetic voice of faith in challenging corruption, hypocrisy and mistaken directions. This has been seen recently in the churches' opposition to gambling. In culturally diverse society's, faith communities ought to be cross-cultural, that is an outward orientation that is part of the universalism that is an authentic core of all religions."

All of the foregoing provides good grounds for optimism and serves to balance what appears to be a worrying fall in attendances in traditional faith communities and an ever increasing secularism in modern life. All of this good work and social capital generated by faith communities underpins the importance of increasing the flow of this good news about each other, rather than forever being on the defensive about our religion.

In recent times there has been a call for ongoing and increased dialogue and this call will no doubt be repeated during this Conference. Dialogue in the usual sense of this word must increase and this must be at all levels from the faith community leaders to the humblest religious adherents.

The difficulty about Dialogues is that they tend to be restricted to the articulate few who meet and talk together – important of course but somewhat formal and seldom involving the ordinary numbers of a faith as opposed to their leaders. To help meet this difficulty I have a proposal.

My proposal is simply this. There should be a whole series of community projects funded where the most important ingredient would be the participation of different religious groups in the realization of some community project – usually a small

facility such as a garden feature in a public park, or a playground or a temporary activity such as a local festival. The common participation in the project would be as important as the ultimate program. I recognize of course that the most effective way to get things done is to enlist the commitment of a particular group or organization and across cultures – and we should try to do more of that. But joint participation of a cross section of different religious adherents would surely be valuable. A start has been made in this area through the recent Living in Harmony grants.

I now wish to discuss a parallel question to that of Dialogue, namely the obligation which rests on each faith to denounce violence and in particular to denounce those who justify violence in the name of religion. At the threshold of this discussion, it needs to be noted that events outside Australia have had adverse and unjust consequences on faith adherents here, especially Muslims. To a lesser extent, there have been similar incidents involving the defacing of Jewish synagogues. As to the effects on Muslims I quote from a recent address by the Dr. Ameer Ali, President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils at The AFIC Congress when the Prime Minister was the Guest of Honour.

“I will be failing in my duty as the President of AFIC if I do not express the Australian Muslim sentiments in relation the events that have taken place internationally since September 2001. The post-September 11 has been a period of untold distress and anguish for the Muslim community. Our Mosques have been fire bombed, our women have been harassed, our school kids have been pelted with stones, our buildings have been vandalized and our leaders have received death threats. We know that this is the work of a minority in this country.

However, the way these particular events have been publicized, analyzed and opinionated in the media by some so-called experts and the manner in which Islam and Muslims have been portrayed in the national print and electronic media have unfortunately sent the message that Muslims in Australia are a troublesome and unwanted community. Recent studies by academics have shown that the Muslim community in this country has become the bogeyman for all types of racial prejudices. This is a country that lauds and protects the

freedom of expressions. However, this right to freedom of expression is being abused.”

Though the terrorism of September 11 and the Bali outrage were unequivocally condemned by Muslim leaders in Australia – and I have been present on some occasions when this occurred, the media both here and the UK has seldom given adequate coverage to these denunciations. One clear exception to this was an article I read in the London Times when I was in Europe recently. I refer to The Times of 1 April which gave almost a full page coverage under the heading “Britain’s Muslims are urged to fight fanatics”. It merits reading in full. I will limit myself to the first few paragraphs but I have copies of the full article with me. It reads:

“Britain’s leading Muslim body took the unprecedented step yesterday of writing to every mosque to urge worshippers to fight against terrorism. The letter, sent to more than 1,000 mosques, urges Muslims to inform on terrorists in their midst in an attempt to curb the zeal of the “hotheaded loonies” on the fringes of Islam in Britain.

Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary General of the Muslims Council of Britain, said that the letter represented a “change of emphasis” among the leaders of the country’s two millions strong Muslims.

It is the first move in an action plan to increase the vigilance and co-operation of Britain’s Muslim community in bringing terrorists to justice, and in distancing Islam from terrorism.”

We in Australia should congratulate Britain’s Muslim leadership for its action which perhaps offers a model for all our faiths.

There is one final matter I wish to raise. When there is a call for denunciation of violence, some may wish to qualify such a denunciation by excluding certain cases such as the so-called just war or a defense against invasion or a revolt against oppression. I do not suggest that there should not be wholehearted denunciations of terrorism inflicting harm on the innocent. But there will be sometimes legitimate

debate on some of the reservations I have mentioned. There is an area however where I would submit there is no room for reservation or equivocation. I refer to the essentially new phenomenon of terrorism by suicide.

This new phenomenon is characterized by three elements – it involves deliberate suicide; secondly, it is brought about by persons or bodies purporting to speak as Muslim religious leaders; and thirdly it invariably involves deadly attacks not on military or police but on innocent civilians.

As to the first element of deliberate suicide those attacks are of an entirely different character to the taking of a very high risk of death such as engaging in say an attack in war which might be described as suicidal. The attacks exemplified by the Trade Centre involved quite deliberate and certain death. In the long history of war and of terrorism, it is difficult to think of any similar systematic suicidal acts, with the possible exception of the Kamikaze bomber attacks in the Second World War but then these were directed at warships.

As to the second element, it is disturbing to find that the participants, who are generally young, indeed even in their early teens on occasions, are assured of immediate entry to Paradise, by those claiming to speak in the name of Islam.

As to the third element, there is nothing new about attacks on innocent civilians. In war we have only to think of the aerial bombings of cities in both World Wars and more recently the terrorist actions of the IRA. But religion was never used to justify any of these.

As I have already noted, these three elements have been denounced on a number of occasions by Muslim leaders.

This new phenomenon merits study and discussion for it adds a new dimension to terrorism. It causes many who are poorly informed about the true nature of the Muslim faith to see it being used to justify the worst kind of terrorism in the name of religion. And it will lead to added pressure and unjust discrimination against Muslims here in Australia.



I have to confess that I was both troubled and curious for I asked the obvious question – how is it that such an extravagant claim to instant entry to Paradise could continue to be made and taught in the name of a faith which treasures along with both Christianity and Judaism – the sacredness of human life.

My inquiries have been very much as an ordinary reader and not in any sense as a scholar. But I was surprised by my researches – even though I hasten to say these were very limited. I did not manage to find any recent books or any recent articles in learned journals on this use of suicide, more particularly purported religious link. The main reference work I used was the Encyclopaedia of Islam. The entry on suicide or *intihar* states that there is no express, direct prohibition of suicide in the Qu’ran. (But then one might observe in parentheses, neither is this so in the Old or the New Testament) The entry goes on to state:

“The Prophet himself certainly disapproved of suicide. A number of *hadîth* leave no doubt that Islam forbids it. The person who commits suicide regardless of the circumstances (unless it happens accidentally) forfeits Paradise. His punishment in Hell will be the repetition of the very act by which he killed himself. The Prophet is said to have refused to say the customary prayers for a suicide. Suicide was thus generally a grave sin.”

Similar conclusions are reached in a learned article “On Suicide in Islam” in the Journal of the American Oriental Society written in 1946 by Franz Rosenthal. He writes:

“While the Qu’ranic attitude toward suicide thus remains uncertain, the great authorities of the *hadîth* leave no doubt as to the official religious attitude of Islam. In their opinion suicide is an unlawful act. Thus, at the latest in the eighth century but most probably earlier than that, Islam as a religion had come to condemn suicide as a grave sin.”

After reviewing the many authorities of the *hadîth*, he concludes:

“The sum and substance of the theological attitude toward suicide as expressed in the relevant traditions can be stated as follows: Suicide is an

unlawful act. The person who commits suicide will be doomed and must continually repeat in Hell the action by which he killed himself.”

The entry on suicide in the Encyclopaedia of Religion is to the same effect as the above views and it confirms the prohibition already noted in Jewish and Christian teaching and tradition. The most up to date information is that contained in the Oxford Dictionary of Islam which was published last year. The entry on Suicide reads:

“One phrase in the Quran mentions suicide (4:29) forbidding it and the subject is little discussed in the exegetical literature. The Prophetic traditions clearly and frequently forbid suicide, reflecting the Islamic ethic of forbearance and patient acceptance of hardship as well as the belief that God, not humankind, has absolute power over human affairs and the term of human life. Despite this disapprobation, some Muslims in the Middle East and Islamic Southeast Asia have recently become known for their suicidal missions. Some Muslims perceive these actions as a necessary part of active armed struggle and view the death that results as martyrdom, not suicide.”

All of this serves only to confirm that those who link deliberate suicide to Divine approval and reward, are distorting religion not preaching it. Since September 11, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, with the Islamic Council of Victoria and other state councils, have issued a strong denunciation of acts of extremism and terrorism. I note that their denunciation was supported by the Victorian Board of Imams. Consideration should be given by the same Board of Imams, or better still to have a National Board of Imams, to repeat these statements of denunciation. Such a statement would help to re-assure those who are disturbed by the claim to religious authority by those described variously as “loonies” and “criminals” by Muslim leaders in the U.K. A statement by a National Board of Imams, who represent the faith leaders of Islam in Australia, would carry much weight and help correct some misrepresentation by those who claim to speak as religious leaders, as there is the danger that silence can be sometimes perceived as a form of support for such extreme acts of violence..

No condemnation of this new evil can be too strong. It is causing grievous harm to the true adherents of the Muslim faith. How these adherents and their leaders are to

address this terrible evil is a matter for them. What those of good will can do is to show understanding and support in what will be a difficult challenge.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- *Conferences on Moslem Doctrine and Human Rights in Islam 1968-1974* Riyadh and Beirut
- *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People*. 1992 New York
- *Immigration Policies of Australian Population and Immigration Council 1977*  
A.C.T.Green Paper
- *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* New York 1985
- *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, Oxford 2003
- *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, London 1971
- F.D. Lewins 'Assimilation and Integration' in *The Australian People*, Angus & Robertson 1988 ed. James Jupp
- *Muslim Community in Australia* ed.by Saled and Akbarzardeh, UNSW Press 2001
- T. Palbas. *Citizenship Conventions 1950-1963*, Jupp op.cit
- *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics 1945-1975* M.U.P. 2000
- *Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, 1988 A.G.P.S. Canberra
- *Proceedings of Conference on Religion and Cultural Diversity*, Melbourne August 1977. Migration Action
- *Proceedings of Conference on Religion and Cultural Diversity*, London 1999
- *Cultural Diversity, Religious Plurality and Government Policy*, Professor Gary D. Bouma, Prato, Italy March 2001
- *Interim report on Research Study on Religion and Cultural Diversity in Australia*, 2004.
- *Suicide in Islam*, Franz Rosenthal, Journal of American Oriental Society, Vol. 66, 1946
- *Relations with Muslims*; The Australasian Catholic Record, October 2003