

**THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS  
REVITALISATION TO EDUCATING FOR  
SHARED VALUES AND INTERFAITH  
UNDERSTANDING**

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# **THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS REVITALISATION TO EDUCATING FOR SHARED VALUES AND INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING**

Religion has come back on to the agenda since September 11, 2001. Policy makers, educators, law enforcement agents, security now all seek to know about religions. We must remember however, that it was coming back before then. I have been studying the management of religious diversity for over three decades. What is clear is that religious diversity is not a disease to be overcome, but a resource; nor is it a problem needing to be transcended for that only produces yet another religious group or perspective. Religious diversity is also often found to be at least as great within religious groups as between them. The internal diversity of Anglicans is legendary, but so too is the diversity of ways Muslims give expression to their faith in the one God, or the diversity of Buddhists, Hindus or any other group. It is impossible to begin a sentence, The .... approach to a topic is thus. Finally, while it has always been the case it has again been made clear that not all expressions of religion are 'moderate', innocuous or for that matter even safe. Some forms of religious expression found as minorities within some religious groups can be considered toxic as they erode human community and impair our ability to live together in peace and mutual respect.

The larger context of the launch of this UNESCO Chair is shaped by the revitalisation of several religious groups. This revitalisation challenges Western liberal secular notions of the place and action of religion in ways that make the work of this chair first and foremost the interpretation of the effects of religious change in the region in ways that assist the formation of needed social policy.

## **I. RELIGIOUS REVITALISATION**

Religious revitalisation has been sweeping the globe. Most noticeably in Islam in Indonesia, Iran, Iraq and elsewhere. But there is also the Christian Right, muchly noticed in the USA, but also Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia. But it is also happening here. Second generation Muslims are more religious than their parents and the Christian

While many secular analysts keep trying to do so, revitalisation cannot be reduced to other explanations – concern for social justice, poverty or ignorance. Those who flew the planes into the Twin Towers were not ignorant, poor or concerned for social justice. They had religiously inspired goal and considered themselves God's agents. Similarly the Christian right are not ignorant, or poor, nor are they motivated by social justice. They are both technologically well advanced on liberal Christians, using latest cell phone technology, the web, and advance audio systems.

Revitalised religion is a religion of the aspiring middle class. It always has been. They emerge as a mechanism for transition to middle class from traditional economies and cultures. They provide legitimations for new found wealth of the recently up-wardly mobile. They provide clear norms and rules for people who find themselves cut loose from their roots in traditional communities. Revitalised religions are often associated with the introduction and acceptance of free market economies. They are more ready to compete in a world of religious ideas and practices.

MOREOVER, Religion is back with teeth. Revitalised religions tend to be more hard-edged; pursuing, offering and demanding moralities of purity and exclusivity. While starting out by insisting also on withdrawal from engagement with the world, they are now moving to engagement with world. Thus, not only are today's religions revitalised and more conservative they are also engaging the world shifting from disengagement to engagement.

Examples of this process can be seen in the neo-cons in the USA, religious links to government in Iran, Islamic movements in Asia-Pacific, and Malaysia. These groups seek to re-shape not only their own religious groups, but also their entire societies.

However, engagement is a two edged sword. Yes religious conservatives will have an impact on other sectors of the society. The irony of engagement is that it leads to a loss of purity. For example, The Family First won a senate seat in Victoria with only 44,000 votes, but they did so only through a deal with the devil – The ALP. Engagement requires compromise, listening and the formation of alliances which in time erode the purity positions of radical religious groups bringing them closer to more widely accepted positions and the acceptance of greater diversity.

The likelihood of conflict is increased by the presence of intensified ideologies of conflict stemming from residual and renewed Christian missionary zeal, new found Pentecostal zeal, Wahabbist theologies of Islamic purity and domination, as well as conflicting political interests.

Again it is important to note most of these causes are not social / economic. Yes declining economies exacerbate the situation making conflict more likely. But these are not movements of social justice; they are movements of believers seeking to put their beliefs into practice. These are not easily reconcilable beliefs or practices. Theologies of purity are exclusivist, denying the right to exist of those deemed to be in error.

### III. EDUCATING FOR SHARED VALUES HAS BECOME MUCH MORE DIFFICULT

Religious revitalisation and conflict make the Asia Pacific a very different context for promoting harmonious living together and for education in values and religious education. Revitalised religions do not presuppose the liberal, laissez-faire values basic to much of Western education. They do not commence interactions with other on the basis of mutual respect, but they move with suspicion. They do not commence with aims of inclusivity, but preach exclusivity. They commence with a negative assessment of difference, resistance to multicultural policies and a readiness to condemn those with whom they disagree including most vociferously those of their own groups. This poses a huge challenge to those who do operate from values of inclusion, fairness, openness, tolerance, and who view diversity positively.

For many working for interreligious harmony, the call to promote shared values becomes a call to take my values, become like me. On what basis is this missionary approach taken? On what basis do we seek to impose, develop, or cultivate our values among these people who differ with us?

The problem with saying that we 'really do shared certain universal values is that while they may be similar, or seem to be from outside, these values do not hang in space – unless you subscribe to a neo-platonic world view – but are grounded in difference, in different communities, histories, traditions, and religious belief and practice. What are the bases for shared values? Externally perceived similarities laced with a few differences

moderate their extreme views and adopt more sustainable values in the longer run, or die out.

The attempt to educate for shared values may well be inimical to conservative, revitalising religions, because of necessity such an approach undermines the very differences they seek to emphasise. It relativises the absolute truth claims they make. Educating for shared values often operates, usually uncritically, by proposing ‘another’ value system, one that is overtly or covertly claimed to ‘transcend’ the value systems of those being educated.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM OF VALUES EDUCATION IN MULTICULTURAL MULTIFAITH SOCIETY

What is needed? First of all, classmates need information about the religious beliefs and practices other classmates, those whose difference they deal with daily. What do my classmates do when they are being religious / spiritual? This can be extended to a description of the religious and spiritual life of other Australians, particularly for students in comparatively religiously homogenous classrooms.

This is not a ‘comparative religions’ approach, because that approach takes a superordinate view of religions, comparing one with another in terms of some set of themes, analytical frames, or intellectual structures. It is also not a ‘history of religions’ approach or ‘sociology of religions’ for similar reasons.

This learning needs to be offered early in schooling. It provides information about different religious groups/practices current in Australia. It should use Australian material, Australian data, and Australian examples. What is needed is an introduction to Australian religion and spirituality as practiced today by a diversity of Australians including Indigenous and more recently arrived Australians, groups as diverse as Anglicans – noting their internal diversity and Brahma Kumaris.

The call for this kind of education was one of the dominant and oft repeat themes of the research Des Cahill and I did. This study of Religious and Cultural Diversity in Australia involved community studies, discussions among faith leaders in each capital city and the gathering of responses from many ordinary people. At all levels, people were sensing

