

## Religious Diversity – Women and Youth

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Australia is a religiously and culturally diverse nation with over 25 major religious denominations represented. Religions span national, geographic, cultural and ethnic boundaries, and freedom of religion was enshrined in Section 116 of the Australian Constitution in 1900.

In Australia, we live in what is basically a peaceful and harmonious society. In the suburbs of our major cities shops display their signs in a multitude of languages. Children of every race, colour, religion and ethnic group play together. Adults of those groups work, socialise and do business with each other, and also freely engage in the Australian democratic process.

### **Australia's progress from policies of assimilation to integration.**

I came to Australia with my immediate family when I was very young, we came as refugees from Nazi Europe to a country which saved our lives by giving us refuge. We also had to adapt to an Australia with a public policy of “assimilating” new immigrants. For me as a little “reffo” girl, who was also Jewish, growing up was a time of “being on the fringe”, in a world in which difference was barely accepted and certainly not celebrated.

My children had a different experience. As beneficiaries of the new policies of multiculturalism they were able to grow up with a pride in their traditions, with self-confidence in their own identity and with a sense of acceptance and inclusion in Australian society. I believe that Australia and the other countries which have adopted multiculturalism, and the respect for religious diversity which goes with it, are better and richer societies as a result.

The sociologist Rita Gross writes.

“Religious diversity is an important component of cultural diversity, which educators are now taking seriously in their pedagogies. However, cultural diversity and religious diversity are often evaluated quite differently. In our society now, there is at least a

It is very tempting for one who believes that one universal deity created and controls the entire cosmos to assume that this deity wants only one religion to be practiced by all humans.

That religion, of course, is "ours," which leads to the situation of some religions condemning each other to oblivion for following the wrong kind of way., with equal logic one could assume that the universal deity gave humans many religious paths, as s/he gave them many cultures, skin colours, and languages, but this has not been the dominant position historically. Because the tendency to be hostile to people who are different is so strong, it is an important religious problem. “

Now my brief is to separate this topic and talk about women and youth. When I discussed it with my husband who is also giving a talk at this forum, he was worried that the men might get offended when I described certain characteristics that I thought women had, and it could be “stereotyping”.

**I hope that one day, maybe as soon as the next generation, we will just talk about people.**

In this context I am going to speak of the special religious experiences for which women have a unique capacity, in which all religions have always recognised the power of the female. At the same time I am going to stress our continuing need to struggle against the limitations of patriarchy, to participate to the full in religious expression and expand our spiritual horizons.

Women's spirituality, has an extra dimension because we have the capacity to create new life and nurture life.

It's all about **relationship and** nurturing and has to do with an **immanent experience** of the Divine. It has been described by traditional writers **as more earthy**, a spirituality which is more about **the here and now**, a more **direct and less mediated** experience of the divine.

However, in today's world, **this special women's role, allocated to us by our patriarchal society** is obviously not enough. There **is a new longing by women to**

From Archbishop Berhaneyesus of Ethiopia

“It is time to give the position of women a greater emphasis and importance. Anger, hate, revenge - this is the way men like to work; women can transcend these to be instruments of dialogue, listening, faith and peace.”

Youth, They are our hope for the future,

In Australia the interfaith projects such as Journey of Promise which I will be featuring in the Best Practise presentation with DVD's is a remarkable Journey of 10 each Muslim Christians and Jews aged between 18 and 25. Male and female. These young people spent 7 days together on a retreat.

They and a growing number of schools have been enthusiastic in joining in interfaith activities, working with the older generation and learning from their experiences. In all this the government has been most supportive with funding.

I also know that the young generation will learn to do it better than we have. Lets hope so anyway.