



Australian Bahá'í Community

Religion, Diversity and Social Cohesion in Contemporary Australia

Questions and answers based on a submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community to the public consultation conducted in 2002 on "Religion, Diversity and Social Cohesion in Contemporary Australia".

Q. Describe the objectives and activities of your organisation:

A. The Australian Baha'i community consists of members in all parts of the country who come together to worship and carry out community and humanitarian activities. The Baha'i community strives to be a model of a peaceful society by implementing such principles as the oneness of humanity, oneness of religion, elimination of prejudice, and equality of the sexes.

Q. Have you participated in any inter-faith service or activities recently?

A. Yes, the Baha'i community has participated on many occasions. For example: inter-faith services in remembrance of the victims of September 11 in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, and Hobart; inter-faith services hosted at the Baha'i House of Worship in Sydney and the ACT Baha'i Centre in Canberra; representation on Faith Communities for Reconciliation; construction of the Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre; "A Sense of Place" multi-faith religious celebration to mark the Centenary of Federation in Melbourne; Heads of Faith gatherings hosted by the WCRP - NSW branch at Parliament House in Sydney.

Q. Nominate the three areas that concern you or your organisation most in the areas of religion, cultural diversity and social cohesion in contemporary Australia.

A. The three areas we nominate are:

1. Eradication of racism through recognition of the oneness of humanity
2. Religious leaders to overcome traditional differences and work together for the advancement of understanding and peace.
3. Reconciliation with indigenous Australians including practical measures to overcome injustice and disparities of wealth.

Q. How do the faith communities of Australia contribute to national well-being and the nation's social and moral capacity, especially in regard to civic duty, cultural respect, social equity and productive diversity?

A. Throughout history religion has been one of the most powerful sources of vision, values and social progress. The faith communities, which collectively represent the majority of Australians, share in common the eternal spiritual principles of love, justice and unity that provide the essential underpinning of Australia's well-being and our social and moral capacity.

The Australian Baha'i community seeks to promote these principles by providing Baha'i education classes which are open to all children, regardless of religious or cultural background. These classes emphasise the development of spiritual attributes or virtues and attempt to develop within the students the knowledge, skills, understandings and values required to be world citizens. The students are encouraged to embrace the concept of the oneness of human kind in all its diversity.

Working with government and non-governmental organisations, the Baha'i community undertakes a range of initiatives at the local and national levels to promote the oneness of humanity, human rights education, and other Baha'i principles.

Q. Suggest ways in which faith communities could further contribute to the creation of social and moral capital.

A. Faith communities should emphasise that the individual's spiritual fulfilment and well-being are tied up with the collective progress of the entire community. Through service and an active commitment to justice and unity, religion can bring an enormous, positive force to bear on Australia's social development

There is tremendous potential for joint action by the various faith communities on social and moral matters of shared concern, as exemplified by the achievements of former Advisory Group on Faith Communities to the National Council for Reconciliation.

We suggest that the ethical foundation of social and moral capital should be jointly explored by the faith communities with a view to identifying shared fundamental principles for the well-being of society. Such principles may include:

- each individual is born as a trust of the whole community
- women and men are equal
- religious, racial and other prejudices need to be overcome
- the human family is essentially one
- extremes of poverty and wealth need to be eliminated
- the essential nature of life is spiritual

Q. Are there particular ethnic and religious communities or other organisations about whom you have concerns as initiators or as victims of verbal attacks or physical assaults?

A. We have expressed concern about attacks made on members of the Jewish and Muslim communities, including attacks on their places of worship.

Q. How should the relationship between religion and state be positioned in the current context, including the delivery of government services?

A. In the current context, in which Australians hold diverse religious beliefs, it is not appropriate for any religion to be accorded special treatment or status by the state.

At the same time, religious communities and the state can cooperate with each other, in an environment of tolerance and friendship between all religious beliefs, for the welfare of the community as a whole.

The unique contribution to be made by the religious communities is to voice the need for the spiritual aspects of life not to be neglected by government. The health of the community depends on achieving a balance between spiritual and material aspirations, and it is unhealthy for the processes of government to be regarded as a purely material pursuit focussed on competing self-interest, or even pursuit of limited concepts of “national interest”.

Accordingly, we would support the holding of multi-faith services to mark important national occasions and the establishment of a commonwealth interfaith council.

Q. Do changes to the law need to be made in the changing context of religion, cultural diversity and social cohesion?

A. The law must preserve the principle of the oneness and equality of all people, regardless of religious belief, cultural background or gender. Laws that do not uphold this principle need to be changed. In cases where discrimination is common, legal protection for its victims is appropriate and necessary.

More healthy processes are needed for discussion of changes to the law than the present ones, which are often conflictual and focussed on competing interests. Religious communities could assist here by focussing on ensuring that consultation involves all those concerned, highlighting principles of fundamental importance to society, and drawing attention to the welfare of the whole.

Q. How serious is the problem of religious and racial hatred in Australia and what are its antidotes?

A. While not widespread, religious and racial hatred is deep-seated and difficult to eradicate where it exists. Legislation can and does suppress both acts of violence and

the attitude of hatred. But it must be supported by education, beginning in primary school, which is based on the principle of the oneness of humanity.

Interaction with people of different faiths also strengthens appreciation of diverse religious traditions as well as helping individuals to recognise the shared humanity of all people. Without such interaction, other religions remain shrouded in mystery and it is easy for them to become the object of ignorant fears and fantasies.

The principles underlying any solution to intolerance may be found in the teachings of all religions. Religious communities therefore have a special responsibility to work toward dissolving divisions, ending conflicts and establishing security.

Q. What suggestions do you have for inter-church and inter-faith cooperation and activity at the grassroots level?

A. The underlying spiritual principles of all the religions are the same. Inter-faith cooperation and activity should be based on the many principles and concerns that we share in common. The Baha'i community is always keen to support such cooperation at all levels. Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, exhorted its followers to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship".

We would offer the Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong as an outstanding example of the potential for inter-faith cooperation at the grassroots level. Operating with the support of the local Council, this network has, among other projects, developed an information kit on the various religious communities in the area, which is shared with local schools.

Q. How should government and faith communities themselves deal with religious extremism that conflicts with Australian values and cultural practices?

A. Religious extremism undermines the spiritual values that are common to all religions. All religions teach love, and all religions are intended to promote the well-being of the human family. As extremism is often born of ignorance and limited understanding, faith communities should encourage their members to fully and freely investigate the truth of their own religious teachings, as well as others.

Faith communities play an important role in the education of members of their own communities, often from childhood. These opportunities should be used to foster understanding of other religious communities, to ensure that children do not become fanatical in their beliefs and attitudes to others, and to promote the ethic of service to the whole of humanity.

Government has an important role to play through supporting educational programs based on the principle of the oneness of humanity, and active support of inter-faith activities.

Q. What role do religion and faith communities have in Australia's offshore trading and commercial activities?

A. Since religions forge bonds between their followers across national boundaries, the links between Australian and overseas followers can open a path for trading and commercial activities to develop. This is one of many ways in which Australian society can benefit from its multicultural and diverse character.

Q. How can religious groups respond better to the needs of international tourists?

A. Where appropriate, religious groups can open their venues and services to international tourists, both those belonging to their own religion as well as others. Over recent years the Australian Baha'i community has endeavoured to meet the needs of international visitors to the Baha'i House of Worship in Sydney by making literature in foreign languages readily available, training multilingual volunteer guides, and supporting the inclusion of the House of Worship in tourist publications. The House of Worship and its services are open to all people, regardless of religion, free of charge.

Wider education about other religious traditions enables people to better understand, tolerate and meet the special religious requirements of international visitors.

Q. How should Australia handle religious hatred and extremism, both home-grown and imported?

A. The human rights of all Australians should be protected by law, including from acts of hatred and extremism by others.

At the same time, education programs, beginning in primary school, should be based on the principle of the oneness of humanity and genuine appreciation for various beliefs. Comparative study of the various scriptures and spiritual traditions will reveal many similarities between the religions and help to overcome hatred and extremism which are grounded in ignorance.

Q. How should Australia handle the impact of overseas conflicts on its own ethnic and religious communities?

A. Conflicts between ethnic and religious groups are often born of a history of ignorance and limited understanding. In Australia, where ethnic and religious communities have been separated from their historical roots, we have a unique opportunity to facilitate mutual learning which will help to foster respect and tolerance between groups that may be at conflict overseas.

Similarly, the experience of Baha'is who have come to Australia from Iran, where the Baha'i Faith has long been persecuted, is that the decades of misinformation about the

Baha'i Faith to which their fellow Iranians have been exposed can be gradually overcome through patient provision of accurate information through the appropriate media in Australia.

Q. Please select up to four issues only from the following list that are most relevant to you and provide comments. Make sure you use concrete examples.

Religious education in mainstream public and private schools

A. In Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia, Baha'i education classes are offered in state schools during Religious Education lessons.

The Baha'i community has greatly appreciated this opportunity to provide education to Baha'i children as well as others who are welcome to attend these classes. It enables Baha'i children to feel that, although their numbers may be small, their religion is on a par with the other, larger religions.

The content and spirit of the classes reflect the teachings of the Baha'i Faith emphasising the unity of religions and acknowledging the diversity of the human family. Classes include such topics as the religions of the world, peace studies, conflict resolution and the great variety of cultures and festivals celebrated around the world.

We have placed great importance on ensuring that all teachers (who are volunteers) are accredited, undergo a standard approval process, and undertake continuous training at purpose-designed courses.

We support the principle that the parent has the right to determine the nature of the religious education that his or her child is to receive.

Naturally, the Baha'i community also appreciates the inclusion of the Baha'i Faith in general religious education curricula, and actively meets any requests to assist with the development of appropriate materials.

Religion and the role of women

A. Establishing the full equality of women and men in all fields of human endeavour is an essential pre-requisite for peace in the world.

The Baha'i teachings place great emphasis on the full participation of women in all aspects of community life, including in leadership and decision-making. Nevertheless our experience shows that continuous attention needs to be paid to this issue if we are to ensure that traditional assumptions are not unconsciously perpetuated into the future. While women are represented in the elected institutions that are responsible

for the affairs of the Baha'i community at the local and national levels, they have not yet achieved representation equal to that of men.

The Office for the Equality of Women and Men is a national agency of the Baha'i Faith which has been established to assist the Baha'i community to implement the principle of equality, and to promote the equality of men and women outside the Baha'i community. Its operation reflects the understanding that women and men must work together in order to effect enduring change in this area.

Religions have a particular role to play in preventing and dealing with violence against women, which is a significant factor preventing women from achieving their full potential in many parts of the world.

The media and the reporting of faith community activities

A. The media has the potential to play a very constructive role in increasing understanding of different faith communities in Australia. We greatly appreciate the efforts of the ABC Religious Department, in particular, which has produced such a broad range of outstanding programs over the years, including coverage of the Baha'i community and its beliefs.

As a relatively small religion which is not known to everyone in the community, we are particularly vulnerable to misleading or inaccurate media coverage. We make every effort to provide the media with interesting and accurate information in order to prevent such instances from occurring.

Aboriginal reconciliation

A. Continued support for the reconciliation process is vital to achieving justice and harmony between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

Programs designed to address injustice and racism will not succeed unless they are forged with the positive understanding of the spiritual kinship between all human beings. We all need to develop a mutual regard for the essential humanity and dignity of each other and to recognise that, in the end, we are all part of one human family.