Civic Integration for Religious Community Leaders New to Australia: A Multifaith Peacebuilding Approach

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Abstract:
We inhabit a mobile world. Globalisation has resulted in the rise of the movement of religion and therefore an increase in religiously diverse societies. A heightened awareness of global risks has also produced an unprecedented interest in global peace and security initiatives. Multifaith peacebuilding is an example of this phenomenon as it has gained increasing prominence on the global agenda since September 11. The role of religious leaders in promoting violence and peace is being examined by scholars, as is the growing multifaith peacebuilding movement. This paper will discuss a recent Australian pilot study, which applied a multifaith peacebuilding approach to civic integration training for religious community leaders. It argues that the peacebuilding potential of religious community leaders must be recognised and that integration strategies that are inclusive and promote the building of networks between multiple function systems, can contribute to security and social cohesion in diverse societies. Alternately, assimilationist, exclusionist strategies can exacerbate security risks. In an increasingly mobile world, religious diversity has become the norm and multifaith peacebuilding strategies require further research and state support.

Mobile Religion: Networks for Shared Security
We inhabit a mobile world. Globalisation has resulted in the rise of the movement of religion and therefore an increase in religiously diverse societies (Bouma 2002:17). Globalisation has also been cited as contributing to a global rise in religiosity. Some scholars attribute this rise to a regressive reaction against globalization, a retreat into the familiar and secure, in order to affirm threatened self-identity (Kinnvall 2004:742) or a return to anti-social ways that at once fuel and serve the narcissistic neoliberal agenda (Rundle 2006:46). Others have alternatively posited that a relationship between globalisation and religiosity exists however the dynamic is not one of retreat but empowerment. People are increasingly turning to religion for answers and
methods for activism to address the inequities and injustices of neoliberal
globalisation and to promote social justice, both peacefully and violently (Wallis 2005;
McKnight 2005; Bouma 2006; Juergensmeyer 2003). Religious leaders are consequently being acknowledged as playing a critical role in confronting violence and in contributing to the building of networks, between religious communities, state authorities, educational bodies and the media, that advance shared security.

**Multifaith Peacebuilding**

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the role of religion in conflict, conflict transformation and peacebuilding evident in the research of numerous scholars (Johnston & Sampson 1994; Reychler 1997; Appelby 1999; Boulding 1998; Gopin 2000; Abu-Nimer 2001, 2003; Alger 2002; Smock 2002; Ucko 2003; Juergensmeyer 2003; 2005; UNESCO 2005). There has also been a dramatic increase in interfaith initiatives post 9/11. Significantly there has been a shift from interfaith activity initiated by religious communities and interfaith organizations to *multifaith peacebuilding* activities initiated and supported by government, in Australia at the local, state and federal levels (School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University and Australian Multicultural Foundation 2006b). Religious peacebuilding efforts are becoming “increasingly systematic and intentional” (Sampson 1997:305 in Alger 2002:106).

*Multifaith peacebuilding* incorporates interfaith dialogue, celebrations and educational programs to increase awareness and understanding of diverse faith traditions. It also encompasses a multiplicity of reflexive peacebuilding initiatives, which challenge cultures of violence and seek to build non-violent, ethical, diverse and sustainable communities in interreligious and broader social contexts. Multifaith peacebuilding initiatives are implemented by religious organisations, interfaith organisations and increasingly by academics and state actors. Through the building of networks, the principle aim of multifaith peacebuilding is to promote peace within and between multiple function systems a foundation for social cohesion in religiously diverse societies at the local and global level.

Since the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali issued his *Agenda for Peace* in 1992, peacebuilding has been associated with post conflict reconstruction (Religions for Peace 2006:1). The global impact of events such as 9/11 and 7/7 has
resulted in the need for **global post conflict reconstruction** and the need for peacebuilding initiatives in societies directly involved in conflict and societies that are feeling the indirect effects of conflicts elsewhere. In Australia, Islamophobia is prevalent and is being experienced not only by Muslim communities but also by many communities that are incorrectly perceived to be Muslim. An increase of racism and religious vilification has been documented and multiculturalism is being eroded by government funding cuts and by stringent attacks in public discourse (School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University and Australian Multicultural Foundation, 2006b). Multifaith peacebuilding initiatives are increasingly being implemented as potent antidotes to the impact of global crisis events. A heightened awareness of global risks has produced an unprecedented interest in global peace and security initiatives.

As recognition of the risks springing from global interdependencies increases, so too do the compulsion, the opportunity, but also the resistance – stemming, for example, from environmental politics and the politics of human rights – to arriving at cosmopolitan solutions (Beck 2006:22).

**Multifaith peacebuilding** is an example of this phenomenon as since 9/11 it has gained increasing prominence on the global agenda. It shares many principles with Beck’s **cosmopolitan vision**, specifically the foundation of a “cosmopolitan order of values… of what counts in a generally binding way as ‘good’” (Beck 2005:305), a reflexive and self-critical quality (Beck 2005:280) and a recognition of differences (Beck 2006:30). It differs and therefore challenges Beck’s vision as while Beck states that “ultimately, cosmopolitanism is the secularised divine order after the divine order has come to an end” (Beck 2005:309) the vision promoted by multifaith peacebuilding is truly reflective of the second modernity, incorporating both secular and religious peace perspectives.

According to Reychler (1997: 37 in Alger 2002:103) “religions and religious institutions have an untapped and under-used integrative power potential”. Multifaith peacebuilding seeks to tap this potential, drawing on the power of religious community leaders as peacebuilders in diverse societies.

**Civic Integration for Religious Community Leaders New to Australia: A Multifaith Peacebuilding Approach**

A pilot program in civic integration training for religious community leaders, utilising a multifaith peacebuilding approach was recently trailed in Australia. It serves as a
case study of how multifaith peacebuilding and inclusive civic integration strategies can contribute to social cohesion and security in religiously diverse societies. The following is a brief summary of the Introducing Australia: A Course for Clergy New to Australia report findings prepared by the School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University and the Australian Multicultural Foundation (2006a), which outlines the background, methodology and evaluation of the pilot program.

In 2004, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) released the Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia (RCDSA) report. The RCDSA report examined the role that religion and faith communities play in social cohesion and security in Australia (Cahill et al. 2004:6). The study found that religion and religious leaders have played a significant role in the construction of social capital in Australia through contribution to the formation of: values; education; health care; welfare; aid; philanthropy; social justice; multiculturalism and family cohesion (Cahill et al. 2004:11, 72-73). The RCDSA report also documented that Australia’s social capital could be destroyed by: exclusion promoted by religion; religious extremism and intolerance; gender inequity and Anti-Islamic views (Cahill et al. 2004:73).

The RCDSA report identified that there had been an increase in the number of clergy recruited from overseas due to a lack of local religious personnel (Cahill et al. 2004:66). Concerns were raised about difficulties that newly arrived clergy were experiencing in orienting to Australian and in ministering effectively within a multi-faith society (Cahill et al. 2004:66, 67, 123). In order to address these concerns the RCDSA report recommended that a course for all clergy new to Australia be developed, using an inclusive multifaith approach in preparation for ministering in culturally diverse and multifaith society. (Cahill et al. 2004:124).

In 2005 the School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University and the Australian Multicultural Foundation developed, conducted and evaluated a pilot program entitled Introducing Australia: A Course for Clergy New to Australia for DIMIA. The course was designed to impart knowledge and understanding of Australia’s multicultural and multifaith history, politics, laws and values to religious community leaders new to Australia utilising a multifaith peacebuilding approach.

In recent years, particularly in the EU, Canada, UK and Australia there has been a
growing emphasis placed on civic integration for immigrants and for Imam training. The EU Common Agenda for Integration states that integration “is a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States” (Commission of the European Communities 2005:5). However, despite this emphasis, many integration programs currently being developed and implemented in the EU and in other countries have a more one-way assimilation orientation, based on ascribing to local ‘ways of life’ and monocultural values.

Integration strategies in diverse societies, which are not multicultural or multifaith in their orientation, can actually increase tensions and have the opposite intended affect. The UN Secretary General’s Report Uniting against terrorism (2006:7) urges “countries with multicultural societies to reflect on their policies of integration”. It is vital that civic integration programmes do not contribute to growing exclusion or discrimination as this can aggravate grievances and feelings of alienation and marginalization, especially experienced by young people from minority groups who may feel like “outsiders lacking equal opportunities” and can therefore be vulnerable to radicalization. Uniting against terrorism (2006:16) also highlights the importance of education in promoting cultural and religious tolerance and conflict prevention (UN Secretary General 2006:16) and the EU Communication on Terrorist recruitment emphasises the need for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue as counter terrorism strategies (Commission of the European Communities 2005a:6).

Research undertaken in preparation for Introducing Australia indicates that the singling out of Imams as in need of civic orientation training is misguided because it falsely implies that Imams are the only religious personnel experiencing difficulties in adjusting to Australia (Cahill et al. 2004:66,67). It also incorrectly suggests that problems of exclusion, extremism and promotion of violence are to be found in Islam alone. This is a completely false assertion as the majority of religions to some degree have within them the potential for exclusion and for perpetuating cultures of violence, direct and structural, such as gender inequity (Conley Tyler & Halafoff, 2005). Imam training that is concerned with theology and ministry is a completely different issue. All religious communities train their own leaders according to their traditions. The research shows there is a need for the establishment of more Imam training facilities by Muslim scholars in non-Islamic countries and where possible that these institutions receive state support in the form of financial assistance. The idea that the state
endorse or control Imam training institutes when other religious groups are free to control their own training facilities is exclusionist and therefore highly problematic.

The *Introducing Australia* courses consisted of a series of interactive seminars and workshops utilising inquiry learning and collaborative learning methodologies, conducted in a multifaith context. Two *Introducing Australia* courses were held as pilot studies, one in Melbourne and one in Brisbane. A total of 30 clergy participated including Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. The team of presenters also represented religiously diverse Australia. The team included Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and agnostic presenters from Monash University, the Australian Multicultural Foundation, VICPOL, Queensland Police and media. This contributed significantly to creating an atmosphere of trust, ease and inclusion that is vital to the success of such a program. It also encouraged the building of networks within and between multiple function systems such as religious communities, state authorities, educational bodies and the media as a foundation for social cohesion and security in multifaith Australia.

Evaluation indicates that the two pilot courses were well received by participants. News of the Melbourne course was also well received and reported by the media (Zwartz, B. 2005). Participants stated “Multiculture knowledge”, the “chance to interact with other religious leaders”, and “acknowledging other religions and understanding how to deal with different clergy” as the most valuable aspects of the course. These statements both reflect and affirm the benefits of multi-faith peacebuilding approach to civic integration of religious community leaders unique to this program.

A multifaith and multicultural approach to civic integration of religious leaders new to Australia eliminates exclusionist undertones of the Imam training programs that are currently being facilitated and promoted by non-Islamic bodies. Thus, the RCDSA report research findings and the research findings and success of the *Introducing Australia* program indicate that civic orientation training for all religious community leaders new to a multifaith society is best provided in a multifaith context.

**Conclusion**

While there has been significant interest internationally in the training of Imams, particularly in Europe but also in the UK and Canada, development of a multifaith
model of civic integration for religious community leaders, new to a particular country, is an innovative approach unique to Australia. Integration strategies that are inclusive and respectful of cultural and religious diversity can contribute to security and social cohesion in diverse societies. Alternately, assimilationist, exclusionist strategies can exacerbate security risks. The methodology of this course can be transported to other multifaith societies as a best practice example. There has already been some interest shown in the course in the UK and Finland.

Despite the increase of multifaith peacebuilding initiatives since September 11 there has been relatively little research undertaken in this area, particularly regarding the potential of these initiatives to build networks for social cohesion and security in religiously diverse societies. In an increasingly mobile world, religious diversity has become the norm and multifaith peacebuilding strategies require further research and state support. My current PhD research, will attempt to fill this research void.

References


