



Interfaith Education for the Global Citizen: Towards Unity and a Culture of Peace

Ron Mitchell, Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory July, 2007

Introduction

Let me introduce myself – I am Ron Mitchell and I have been working at the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT) based in Darwin, initially as a Project Officer and most recently as Acting Director, for most of the past two and a half years.

First established in 1977, the MCNT is a community-based non-profit organisation managed by a board of dedicated volunteers, and advocating for the interests, concerns and aspirations of migrants and refugees in out part of the world. The MCNT interacts with its clients and stakeholders through a range of projects and programs funded by local, Territory and federal government agencies.

I came to this NGO as an educator. Having worked as a school teacher in cosmopolitan multicultural Darwin for a number of years, I was always acutely aware of, and intensely interested in the concept of global education: preparing our young citizens not just for effective participation and inclusion in contemporary Australian society, but also for life in the global community and economy of the 21st Century.

Australian society is ever-evolving; it has changed significantly since I was a boy growing up in simpler times in what was still an Anglo-centric colonial outpost. As I see it, there are two major themes underpinning this new socio-economic context in which we find ourselves, and influencing all of us in all we do as educators and learners: globalisation and pluralism.

Globalisation and pluralism present challenges and opportunities. All of us – and we are all educators and learners – more than ever before, live in close contact and interact with people from a diversity of cultural, religious, and ideological traditions. No single culture, religion, or ideology would seem to have a convincing claim to be the one voice of truth.

What is so great about interfaith education?

Our faith, our spiritual belief system is, I would argue, the defining element of the identity of individuals and communities; of how we view ourselves, and how we view the world and relate to other people. Our faith identity is our anchor in strange and complex environments, our coping mechanism for change and stress.

There is a long history of creative interaction between the major faiths in Australia. Mutual respect and interfaith dialogue has enriched our lives and contributed to the embrace of multiculturalism in contemporary Australian society.

There is a growing awareness among education stakeholders and practitioners of the benefits of interfaith education. Interfaith education challenges stereotypes, confronts discrimination and prejudice, nurtures and sustains a culture of peace, and empowers our young people to act in the long-term interests of the planet and humanity.

In this paper in the AUSTRALIA AS PART OF THE GLOBAL VILLAGE stream, I will present the case for interfaith education as essential to preparing our young people as future global citizens and peacemakers. Interfaith education assists young people with developing empathy and compassion; an understanding of difference, and an acceptance of diversity.

The MCNT has developed close working relationships with a number of local schools, and has been involved in presenting innovative experiential learning activities in interfaith education – excursions and information sessions – based on national and local models.

Interfaith education is vital to a 'holistic' integrated approach to curricula that promotes fairness, justice, equity and inclusiveness, celebrates multiculturalism and religious diversity, and caters for not just the intellectual and material dimensions of education, but also the emotional and spiritual dimensions. Through interfaith education we engage both the commonalities that bring us together and the differences that make us distinct and unique.

I'll provide some examples and some slides of these activities and the types of cross-cultural and interfaith encounters enjoyed by our local school students. Perhaps you would like to introduce some of these interfaith education activities in the schools of your local community.

What then of globalisation and pluralism?

Globalisation can be defined the integration and interdependence of economic, cultural, political, demographic and social systems across geographical boundaries. We know about globalisation's intrinsic characteristics: the compression of time and space; the spread of new information and communications technologies; reduced barriers to trade; the declining role of national borders. There are all sorts of arguments for and against globalisation of course, and I will leave it up to others to canvass those arguments. Nevertheless, I am sure that most educators would agree about these three points:

(i) it is here to stay; (ii) its impacts are increasing; and (iii) no country can escape it.

We live in a globalised world: no longer are we confined by isolation to an island continent; we are exposed to an immense diversity of ideas, philosophies, cultures and lifestyles. This of course can be both an enriching and a frightening experience. It is perhaps in the global context that interfaith dialogue has the greatest potential for productive engagement.

Globalisation in the 21st Century imposes unrelenting and unprecedented change, with all of its positive and negative dimensions, for all aspects of human activity and interaction. In our increasingly close-knit 'global village', cultures and religions which were once isolated from one another are coming into closer contact; and ideas and concepts which were once considered foreign and distant are becoming well-known and accepted.

Of relevance to Darwin's geographical setting, Australia is situated in the most culturally, religiously and ethnically diverse region in the world. Non-Christian faiths – Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism in particular – are not only rapidly expanding in the Australian social demography, but are socially predominant and pervasive in the nations of South East Asia.

Australia is often described as a mini United Nations: a land of people of many traditions, cultures and faiths living together in relative peace and harmony. Contemporary Australia is a pluralistic, multicultural society with the highest proportion of people born overseas – almost a quarter – of any nation in the western world. Over the past 60 years, the Australian nation has welcomed 6 million migrants from more than 200 countries.

Diversity is strength, and cultural and religious diversity as a primary asset: a key part of our national identity, and a source of social and economic capital. The predominant theme of multiculturalism in Australia is 'unity in diversity'. The egalitarian brand of Australian multiculturalism is characterised by its inclusiveness, and the commitment to optimising access and equity and maximising participation of all citizens and residents.

Why study about religion?

We live in an outwardly secular society, yet paradoxically it is also one that is multi-religious where the majority of the population embraces some sort of faith affiliation. Faith, religion and spirituality strongly influence individual and group identity; and commitment to the greater whole has been fashioned by the spiritual vision of the major faith communities.

Western culture as we know it in Europe, North America and Australia has been influenced over a long period of time by Christianity and its values. Yet in the global context Christianity claims only a third of the market share of faith adherents, and is but one of a number of major world religions.

The colonial heritage of Anglo/Scottish hegemony and the Christian tradition have had a profound influence on the development of Australia's social and cultural identity and the nature of its political and legal systems. However we must accept that multicultural pluralist Australia is no longer an outpost of Europe and has moved closer to Asia.

Religious pluralism and the essential interdependence of humanity have forged the realisation that we all increasingly interact with other perspectives and belief systems; we can draw strength from our diversity. An understanding of the diverse range of cultures and faiths in our global community – their histories and their perspectives – fosters mutual respect, compassion, inclusion and acceptance.

Yet among this religious pluralism, the forces of globalisation and recent world events have demonstrated more than ever before in history the essential interdependence of humanity and drawn us closer to our neighbours in our region. We are global citizens with a shared destiny in a multi-faith world.

The religious 'divide' – is there more to unite us than to divide us?

Disputes and disagreements over religious beliefs have been and continue to be one of the main sources of conflict in the modern world. In the 21st Century, it seems that religion has assumed centre stage and has the potential to produce both the best and the worst in people, depending on time, place and circumstance.

When we investigate and teach our young people to understand and respect the major world religions, we notice that there are apparently major differences between them. We cannot help but notice that similarities can create a sense of community and harmony between religions, whereas differences can create antagonism.

The perceived differences between various religions can be mainly ascribed to be the result of the context of their emergence in different cultures, times and societies throughout human history. Religions are the product of history, and thus both similar and different according to the historical factors that have shaped them. The social teachings of these great religions may differ but only because they address the requirements of the diverse societies during successive stages of social, economic and political evolution of civilisation.

All religions teach us to respect the well-being and dignity of all fellow citizens and forbid the murder of innocent people; all religions teach us to tell the truth, and to not take from others what belongs to them; all religions teach us that humanity should benefit from spiritual practice; and that personal transformation can occur through spiritual enlightenment. In particular, all of the religions believe in the 'Golden Rule': "*doing to others as we would wish to be done to us*"; i.e. to make us all better human beings in thought, word and deed.

In all the great religions the underlying spiritual teachings are universal: religions are not contradictory and are successively updated versions of the same basic religious beliefs and spiritual principles. Perhaps after all, all the great religions are essentially the same – they are like different paths up the same mountain to the one God.

Each of the world's great religions brings a unique perspective on human spirituality; all of these religions are needed to enrich human experience and world civilisation; each religion has its own distinctive contributions to make; and each religion in its own way is suitable to a particular group of people as they understand life. The world needs them all.

Why are there perceived conflicts between the religions? Perhaps because we don't take the time to listen, understand and respect other belief systems; perhaps because we don't emphasise the similarities between religions and our common concern for human well-being and happiness. We should as fellow global citizens urge the followers of different religions to put aside their differences, to listen to the message of tolerance, to protect the freedom of religious expression, to engage in interfaith dialogue, and to seek common ground. I believe that there is much more that unifies us than makes us distinct.

Nurturing the global citizen and peacemaker

In this increasingly interdependent world, a new social concept has arisen: the global citizen. What do we mean by the term 'global citizen'? A global citizen is someone who is aware of the wider world and has a sense of their own role as a world citizen; respects and values diversity; has an understanding of how the world works economically, politically, socially, culturally, technologically and environmentally; believes in social justice; participates in and contributes to the community at a range of levels from local to global; is willing to act to make the world a more sustainable place; and takes responsibility for their actions.

We need to train our future citizens to be global citizens and peace makers. Peace is more than simply the absence of war and violence. Peace is something that we all have to work at; peace must be cultivated, learned and practiced at the local level. Peace is a universal desire and concept deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of people everywhere; shared by peoples of all faiths, and is essential to our common humanity and destiny.

As we move into the 21st Century, peace is no longer the exclusive domain of governments, non-government organisations and corporations; it cannot be guaranteed through multi-lateral agreements alone. Peace belongs to all of us, and we must all act to transform conflicts in everyday life into cooperation. Peace is about our values, attitudes and behaviours in our communities, our workplaces, our families, our schools and our homes.

Putting the theory into practice: interfaith education activities

The MCNT became involved in interfaith education activities with local schools for two *Living in Harmony* funded programs sponsored by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC): "Faith in Harmony" in 2005 and the "Palmerston City Interfaith Network" in 2006. As they say, a picture tells a thousand stories; I will let the slide show explain these activities.

One of the most popular activities was the state-wide '*Many Faiths, One People*' poster competition which from April 2005 invited and encouraged the Territory's school students, Years 5 to 10, to submit poster artworks that celebrate multiculturalism and cross-cultural and interfaith harmony. The title '*Many Faiths, One People*' is the inspired slogan borrowed with the permission of the Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong in Victoria.

The culmination of the poster competition was the awards presentation at Government House in October 2005. The *'Many Faiths, One People'* poster exhibition in October 2005 at the Darwin Entertainment Centre's Exhibition Gallery and open to the general public, showcased 120 of the most outstanding artworks. This exhibition was sponsored by the NT Department of Employment, Education and Training.

The best judged posters were featured in the 2006 *'Many Faiths, One People'* interfaith harmony calendar sponsored by the NT Office of Multicultural Affairs. The calendar highlights the significant religious festivals, holy days and feasts for the major faiths represented in the Northern Territory. The full-colour multicultural calendars created quite an impact locally were great hit with the stakeholders in the competition – students, parents, grandparents, teachers and sponsors – and were distributed to schools throughout the Territory, as well to other interested stakeholders in Australia.

Such was the response, and with so many great artworks, that the MCNT decided to reprise the concept and produce the 2007 interfaith harmony calendar – sponsored again by the NT Office of Multicultural Affairs. This concept has now received ongoing funding from the NT Government and a similar calendar with student's artworks will again be published for 2008.

Interfaith information sessions were organised in September and October 2005 for participating schools involving presentations from representatives of various faith groups. From the formalised feedback collected it was evident that the students enjoyed this opportunity for interaction and to learn about different faiths.

Another school-based activity in November 2005 which proved to be popular and productive in terms of engaging the students were all-day excursions to places of worship in Darwin for students from participating schools. At the sites visited, authoritative and interesting speakers were enlisted to provide authoritative insights into the principles and practices of the various faiths. Usually the schools programmed the excursions as an assessable component of studies, and the students were required to ask prescribed questions and to fill out their worksheets. Collated comments indicated that the students found the excursion to be a worthwhile learning exercise.

Another activity was a class discussion/mini-debate to the topic: *"Are there more similarities than differences between the major religions"* organised for a participating school in November 2005. The format adopted for this activity was for 10 consecutive one-to-one debates between pairs of affirmative and negative speakers; arguing for or against a proposition within the theme of the topic. This activity proved to be popular, particularly as they were cool (caps, tee-shirts etc) sponsored prizes, and the students were well-versed in ideas for discussion and aspects of this debate topic from preparatory class work.

From December 2005 to January 2006 during the school holidays a series of poster workshops were conducted at the Palmerston City Library as a competition to the universal interfaith theme of the *'The Golden Rule'* *"treating others with the same respect and consideration as one wishes to be treated"*. The 6 winning artworks were published and featured in a set of *'Golden Rule'* postcards for local distribution later in 2006.

In March 2006, courtesy of funding from the NT Government's Community Benefit Fund, the Sydney-based "Goodness and Kindness" program was brought to Darwin and Palmerston for the first time. This award winning national program is funded by DIAC as a *Living in Harmony* Partnerships project, and to date about 30,000 children throughout Australia have participated in the program. The program visited 6 local schools (mostly primary schools) over 2 days in its inaugural NT tour with an outreach of some 1,500 students.

The basic model of the program is that representatives of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish religions share their ideas and perceptions about religious diversity, community harmony and shared values of compassion and acceptance. The hour-long theatrical program is fast paced and interactive with plenty of surprises and is a combination of storytelling, skits, fun activities and exercises, role play with audience participation and impromptu Q & A sessions.

“Goodness and Kindness” nurtures the irrepressible optimism and idealism of our future global citizens and demonstrates that people from very different faiths can work together and create synergy and harmony. The 2006 NT team comprised Jewish, Muslim and Christian presenters from Sydney as well as a local Bahá’í representative.

And the beat goes on ...

Although the MCNT is not presently specifically funded for projects which include interfaith education activities, such was the momentum, interest and outreach from the *Living in Harmony* projects that this NGO has maintained its close relationships with Darwin’s various faith communities and local schools. The MCNT remains a major stakeholder in local interfaith dialogue and education activities.

This year in March and in May the MCNT organised all-day ‘multicultural’ excursions (to places of workshop or ‘sites of significance’) for students from two local high schools based on the structure and itinerary of excursions organised by MCNT in late 2005. These excursion activities to themes of inclusion, cultural diversity and social history are aligned with the curriculum, and are popular with teachers and middle school students.

The sites visited on the excursions are primarily places of worship such as the Hindu Temple, the Buddhist Temple, the Mosque, Christ Church Anglican Cathedral, St Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and the Chinese Temple. These sites have an interesting social history, and provide an orientation for young people to Darwin’s multicultural community.

In June 2007, the “Goodness and Kindness” program returned to the NT (now known as “Australians Together in Values”). This year the program was wholly funded by DIAC and visited 11 schools (mostly primary schools) over 4 days with an outreach of some 2,300 students. The MCNT played a key role with booking the schools and organising the schedule. The 2007 NT team comprised Jewish, Muslim and Christian presenters from Sydney as well as a local Indigenous representative. The web site for “Australians Together in Values” (“Goodness and Kindness”) is: www.togetherforhumanity.org.au

In August 2007, the Adelaide-based “Project Abraham”, another interfaith education program also funded as a *Living in Harmony* Partnerships project by DIAC, will be touring the Northern Territory – Alice Springs, Katherine and Darwin – for the first time. The web site for “Project Abraham” is: www.projectabraham.org.au

“Project Abraham” promotes interfaith understanding and dialogue and develops respect and explores commonalities between three Abrahamic Faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – through an Abrahamic exhibition and interfaith seminar open to the broader community, as well as engagement with schools. In Darwin over 2 days, 6 groups of students from local schools will experience an Abrahamic exhibition presented for an extended season and open to the general public at the Casuarina Public Library in suburban Darwin.

The exhibition will feature photographs, maps, and a wide range of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish artefacts. The 90 minute conducted exhibition sessions will also include presentations from the Christian, Muslim and Jewish perspectives, and a Q and A session.

Conclusion – is interfaith education worthwhile?

The Northern Territory has had for some time a well-established national reputation for having a successful harmonious and tolerant multicultural community with a diversity of faiths and cultures. Multiculturalism has always been a way of life in the Territory.

There are a number of reasons for this: Darwin's unique history and social isolation from the eastern states is often cited as the impetus for community harmony as it necessitates requires component communities to build relationships and forge a harmonious multicultural society; in addition the each of the many and varied cultural and faith groups in Darwin has such a small population base, that its members are forced to interact with the wider society.

This is not to say however that this relative peace and harmony in the community and freedom of religious expression – particularly in the light of the current global political and social climate – is not fragile and cannot be easily challenged and severely compromised through the widespread re-emergence of religious prejudice and xenophobia.

All too easily the good intentions of those seeking to find common ground and to foster interfaith and cross-cultural understanding and community harmony can be derailed, even in Darwin, by those seeking to cause discontent and disunity in the community.

I believe that in the Australian context, there is little doubt that educational strategies that foster acceptance, understanding and appreciation of religious diversity assist in maintaining social cohesion and community harmony in our multicultural society.

Over the past few years, it has been a rewarding experience for the MCNT to work with local schools and create opportunities for interfaith dialogue and dialogue. We have witnessed an enthusiastic response from partners and stakeholders as well as the wider community (and the media) to the varied interfaith education activities we have introduced and organised.

We at the MCNT believe that these activities have facilitated an increased awareness and understanding of interfaith issues and have brought many tangible and lasting benefits to the Territory's multicultural community.

In the integrated and interdependent world of the 21st Century, providing an interfaith perspective is essential for the education of our future global citizens and peacemakers. We at the MCNT believe that our young people are our future. It is in our and their best interests that they be equipped with knowledge about the different faiths practiced in the Northern Territory and South East Asia.

In our multi-faith society there are many spiritual paths, all worthy of understanding and respect. Interfaith dialogue, by focusing on the unifying spiritual principles that embrace all of humanity, has the potential to bring about global peace. Young people should be encouraged to interact and empathise with people who practice different faiths.

In our increasingly close-knit 'global village', more than ever before in history, our young people will need to interact daily with and understand other concepts, cultures and belief systems. Let me repeat: we are global citizens with a shared destiny in a multi-faith world.

Interfaith education will ensure that our young people will act in the long-term interests of the planet and humanity. Let us work towards, and advocate for, the integration of global education across the whole of the curriculum: thereby we will educate our young people towards a globalisation that humanises, and not one that marginalises.

Thank you. To find out more, please call me on 0410 079 248 or email ppd@mcnt.org.au