

Christian Engagement in Project Abraham and the Abraham Institute: Personal Reflections.

Geoff Boyce. February 9, 2014

A short contribution to a panel discussion: The Abraham Institute: *following the path of tikkun olam*, at the 26th Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Jewish Studies, Adelaide University, 9-11 February 2014

They say that in comedy, timing is everything!
For me, in my work as a chaplain, context is everything!

Katherine Goode and I have been on parallel journeys – hers in establishing *Project Abraham* and the *Abraham Institute* and mine, establishing *Oasis* at Flinders University.

So I would like to contextualise my contribution to this forum - my experience of being invited to be a Christian representative on the Board of *Project Abraham* - by reading a short excerpt from my book 'An Improbable Feast', the story of how *Oasis* was born. I think it provides a common context to both initiatives – *Project Abraham* as well as *Oasis*.

From the opening of the Introduction:

A multifaith consciousness is dawning in the West. The many colours of different religions had gone largely un-noticed in the Western public mind - until jet aircraft smashed into New York's Trade Centre in the event we now refer to as 9/11, or *September 11, 2001*.

As if overnight, interfaith dialogues began to proliferate; not just religious leaders being polite to each other, but ordinary people trying to understand what religious impulses lay behind the threat now evident in almost daily news broadcasts of horrific terrorist events, seemingly conducted in the name of Islam. The Western world had thought it had grown up enough to have put religion aside. But now religion was back on the agenda - but for all the wrong reasons. The dawning of multifaith consciousness in the West had become evident out of necessity *to understand in order to make safe*.

Protectionism

Protection of our own interests became a dominant theme of Australia's government in the aftermath of 9/11. "Border Protection" became a vote-winning catch-cry. A study, "Safeguarding Australia", was commissioned and an annual "Safeguarding Australia Conference and Forum on National Security and Resilience" established.¹ We began to hear about "Homeland

¹ <http://www.safeguardingaustraliasummit.org.au/>
viewed July 23, 2009

Security” and Terror Alerts. Prime Minister Howard, flanked by Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty and ASIO Director-General Paul O'Sullivan, convened a top-level council of handpicked Islamic leaders.² Eight millions dollars was earmarked for a National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (now, it seems expected to identify potential “Islamic extremists” among us?³). *‘Understanding the other in order to make safe’* catapulted religion, and Islam in particular, on to the front pages.

But *‘understanding the other in order to make safe’* is an insufficient basis for harmonious cooperation in a civil, multicultural and multifaith society. A politics of fear may be a sure way to win elections, but it’s no way to live.

Firstly, *‘understanding the other in order to make safe’* is unlikely to really “understand”, if motivated by an ethos of protectionism. It only understands what it wants to understand for its own self-interest. As we watched in shock the TV coverage of the collapse of the twin towers, replayed over and over again, as if seeing wasn’t believing the first time around, the question on all our lips was WHY? The response was not understanding, but a “War on Terror” (the irony that such a war would perpetrate its own terror seemed to be lost) - and for all good Americans to go out and shop!

Secondly, terrorism by suicide bombing works in the same way in the national and international spheres as a ‘little terror’ in a classroom. Any good teacher will tell you they have to develop strategies to prevent the extremist behaviour of one or two who want to dominate the teacher’s attention at the expense of the others in the room. But they will also understand that disruptive behaviour is invariably a symptom of a hidden condition. The good teacher understands that such behaviour is a form of communication and needs to be understood, not just dismissed as a discipline problem. Peace, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, goes well beyond *‘understanding the other in order to make safe’* just as teaching goes well beyond keeping control in the classroom. A harmonious multicultural and multifaith society needs more than the absence of conflict for its sustainability.

Thirdly, continuing the classroom metaphor, the protective priorities of the Australian government failed, and continue to fail, to give attention to

² <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/howard-opens-muslim-summit/2005/08/23/1124562829836.html>

viewed July 23, 2009

³ Anti-terrorist Crackdown on Religious Extremists

And he (Attorney-General, Robert McClelland) warned that centres for Islamic studies at tertiary institutions should have a particular responsibility in identifying people at risk of becoming extremists.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/07/22/2632741.htm?site=news>

viewed 22 July 2009.

“the rest of the class”. Their priorities were reactive and short-sighted. Would the government grant millions of dollars for a Centre for Hindu Studies, for example, only when the needs of the Hindu community have been recognised following a bombing of the Sydney Harbour Bridge by extremists devoted to Siva? Regardless of their rhetoric, the Bush-Howard reaction focused attention on the Muslims and created a line between Islam and the West. Muslims feel it. They live with continued anxiety. How else do you account for the hundreds of speaking engagements by moderate Muslims in defense of their faith? And the other minority religions are left looking on, outside the main game.

Henri Nouwen’s conception of Hospitality

During this same decade a group of university chaplains, each representatives of diverse religions, was coming together at the Flinders University, in Adelaide, South Australia, with a vision of unconditional hospitality in service to all.

When I heard about Project Abraham, an effort to get the Jewish and Islamic communities together, I was delighted. I went to the seminars as an observer. This was the kind of grass roots response that was needed, in my view – people of different faiths, who in the past were strangers in the same land, meeting, and through hospitality and face-to-face listening to each other, becoming friends across their differences. This was the kind of leadership we needed, and I commend Katherine for it!

Project Abraham also contributed to my own faith journey. For I, a closeted Christian, was also on a journey of discovery about other faiths – not from books, as I had experienced during my training as a teacher, but by face-to-face engagement.

My experience of the early Project Abraham coincided with our efforts at Flinders, where I had been appointed chaplain by the Uniting Church to create an inclusive centre that supported students and staff of all persuasions. We did this by creating a truly multifaith chaplaincy – not one by name only, in which we were simply polite to each other as we went about our individual businesses, but one that served the university from a heart of collegiality - *together*. And the means of service sprang from a common valuing of hospitality, to each other as chaplains and then to students and staff; hospitality – creating safe space for the other – not just physically and socially, but also intellectually and spiritually. And from this we created a Faith Friendly Charter that any community may adopt.

So when *Project Abraham* invited the Christians to complete the triumvirate, it was with much pleasure that I, along with Sr. Bernadette Marks, accepted the invitation to represent the SA Council of Churches on its Board.

Probably my most useful contribution arose when there was a hiccup from the Government Department administering the grant for *Project Abraham’s* travelling program. Katherine had asked a Christian scholar in Western Australia

to write a piece about what Christians believe about the person of Jesus Christ. I also happened to know the writer through my national university chaplaincy connections and had no doubts about his competence and integrity. But obviously someone in the Federal Department had a much more conservative view about things and wanted Katherine to change what had been written. Katherine rightly refused and contacted me. She was obviously under pressure. None of us wanted the whole project to come unstuck over the whim of some Canberra bureaucrat, who I thought had no mandate to meddle in any case.

I asked Katherine to leave it with me - I had an idea.

I sent the manuscript to a Pentecostal theologian friend of mine and asked if he would get an opinion from the academic in his conservative institution responsible for Christian Biblical Studies. I reckoned he would give it a green light; so when Katherine passed on his assessment with the name of the conservative institution attached, Canberra would have no come back.

It was so.

As part of the Project, Katherine asked members of the Board to visit the program in action. The two programs I visited were in Murray Bridge – where I had previously spent four years as a teacher and knew some of the local people, and Darwin, where I had previously conducted a clergy retreat for ministers of the Uniting Church in the Northern Territory and presented Biblical studies at their annual assembly.

I will never forget meeting the young African-born Imam at the *Project Abraham* gathering in Darwin. He told us of his delight in friendships among people of other faiths. This delight was a consequence of how he obtained his Islamic education. As a young lad, he had always wanted to be an Imam, but there was no way his family could afford his education. However, a Christian minister, convicted by the desire of this young man, offered to pay for him to study at the most prestigious Islamic university in Cairo. This act of generosity left an indelible mark on him. Now he is the Imam in Darwin and offering this same generosity to others.

It is this same spirit that I find in Katherine and those members of the Beit Shalom community I have got to know. It is transformative.

I pray God's blessings on all who strive for appreciative interfaith understanding as Katherine and her supporters in Beit Shalom continue to strive.

Thank you!