



Interfaith dialogue on how to counter extremism

On the basis of ‘starting with ourselves’, three commentators from each of the Abrahamic faiths spoke to IofC’s National Gathering on ‘What is extremism in my religion – and how to counter it?’

The forum on 11 June at Armagh, the IofC centre, was co-hosted by the members of Melbourne’s Indonesia Club, who enriched the evening with music, dancing and dinner for 80 people. It was moderated by former Religion Editor of *The Age*, Barney Zwartz (now Senior Fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity).

With 50 years experience with the BBC and Radio Australia, Indonesian-born journalist Nuim Khaiyath spoke from his knowledge as a lay preacher. Quoting ‘the verse of the sword’ from the Holy Qur’an – which is used as a pretext by terrorists to ‘slay those who are non-believers’ – Khaiyath said there were 130 other texts that counteract this one verse, and quoted, as an example, the verses: ‘It may be that God will bring mutual affection with those whom you regard as enemies, for God is all-powerful... God does not forbid you to show them kindness, for verily God loves those who act equitably.’

Muslims are not allowed to speak ill of another person’s religion, said Khaiyath, who is dedicated to follow the Islam of ‘the middle way, compassionate, merciful, tolerant’.

At Friday prayers a few days earlier, Khaiyath had been confronted by a young man from the Middle East who berated him for preaching tolerance toward non-Muslims. Quoting the verses above, Khaiyath steered him back to the sacred text, pointing out the dangers of selective quotations.

‘A text without a context becomes a pretext,’ said Rev Dr Tony Floyd, who for eight years was national director of the Uniting Church’s Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry. Narrow interpretation of Bible texts could have you stoning your neighbours, he said. He pointed to Jesus’s challenge of the religious extremism of his day.

Setting, context and timing all are important as we seek to discern the meaning of these texts for today, said Floyd. In fact, people of different faiths ‘reading... and hearing our sacred texts in our time and place’ together is one way to break down the ‘dangerous, divisive and unfaithful attitudes’ which are at the root of religious extremism.

In his view, ‘radical Christian extremism is just as twisted, sinister and dangerous as its other religious cousin... The only difference is that the radical Christian extremists have learned to convince people that their hatred, bigotry and violence is normal,’ especially when equated with national identity or political causes.



[From left] Barney Zwartz, Nuim Khaiyath, Tony Floyd and Deborah Stone.
 Photo: Jamie Vu

In one sense, said Floyd, radical Christianity is what is needed. He quoted Martin Luther King who, when accused of being an extremist, wrote, ‘Was not Jesus an extremist for love: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you...” Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?’

As an antidote to extremism of the wrong kind, Floyd proposed that the sharing of personal and communal stories can open doors to understanding our differences and similarities. ‘We cannot trust other human beings from a distance.’

Deborah Stone, who edited the Australian Jewish News, and was executive director of the Anti-Defamation Commission, traced the influence of ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel who tend not to engage with modern life but focus on matters of religious practice. She drew a distinction between these, and secular Jews at the right of the political spectrum, who reject any compromise on the Palestinian question. She called for supporting Israeli moderates, so as to get beyond the politics of fear and the ‘never again’ mentality.

For Stone, who currently edits Australia’s leading arts industry website, there is no point in arguing with the ultra-conservatives and extremists. ‘I object if they try to convert me; but then I should not try to convert them.’ Rather, she called for mutual support, saying that ‘it is really important to speak up for each other’s religious communities when they are under attack. We all have the capacity to create a more peaceful future.’

‘Addressing the root causes of extremism of all kinds’ was set as a strategic priority by the International Council of IofC meeting in Nigeria in February. A number of commentaries on this challenge are posted at www.iofc.org/global-voices

'The old order changeth...?'

It started with an Afghan refugee breaking new ground to remove isolation, and ended with an 89 year-old volunteer plunging a knife into a Black Forest cake to celebrate his retirement.



Executive Officer Athalia Zwartz (right) and her assistant, Kirsty Argento.
Photos: Andrea Braeckle

In some small ways, the National Gathering in Melbourne, 10-12 June, gave a foretaste of 'the old germinating the new', as IofC's executive officer Athalia Zwartz put it.

Nazer Nazir wanted to help refugees break through 'isolation and negativity' when he moved to Dandenong in 2014. He told how the *Life Matters* workshop provoked him to action. 'If I don't do it today, then when?' Within weeks he was working with the local MP and Council to launch the Afghan Australian Initiative, which has since run three workshops helped by IofC friends.

Tom Ramsay 'retired' from being a manager in BHP

(as it was then) 27 years ago and has spent much of his time since applying himself to financial and administrative tasks for IofC Australia, including managing Grosvenor Books. Now that this publishing arm of IofC is being absorbed in the Communications Portfolio, Tom can 'close the books'. The cake was to honour the extraordinary service he and his wife, Elisabeth, have given.

But transition, as Athalia made plain, is difficult, painful, even confronting. It is like the cycle of birth, life and dying. One session reviewed data from a profile of IofC's national network, 66% of whom are over 50, and 45% have known IofC for 25 years. What is the data telling us?

While 'building a core team to work for the future of IofC', we have to 'consciously allow new things to emerge,' said Athalia. With many variables, it means working at a direction not to a strategic plan. What can keep us together, across generations, is 'the fertile ground of the spiritual/intuitive, values, hospitality, friendship, genuine care...'

The challenge came from various sides. With disarming candour, an African-Australian artist Chenai Mupotsa asked her audience, mostly twice her age: 'What am I afraid to let go?' Kate Barrett-Lennard from Perth took us on a bracing tour of the painful issues and attitudes that are surfacing in her work as a family counsellor. A workshop brainstormed around what moral values mean to us.

The AGM saw the longest serving member of the Council of Management, John Mills, retiring after 43 years. 'I see my departure as being engaged with this transition,' wrote John, who continues in some operational roles. 'I am delighted that four new faces have joined the Council in the last year.'

IofC Australia invests in its future

For several reasons, the 2015-2016 Annual General Meeting on 12 June in Melbourne marked a milestone for IofC Australia.

For one, an operating budget was presented to Members. (Till now, IofC's finances have been responsibly stewarded by the Council of Management responding to needs and priorities as agreed by a wider fellowship, but without a budget.) For another, this budget intentionally invests in the operational development of the organisation and its future. And for another, the budget was prepared by a new Treasurer, Paul Wilkins.

During 30 years with Telstra and IBM, Paul provided IT project and financial management services for large corporations in Australia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and other countries. Taking early retirement 14 months ago he weighed his options. Through his long association with IofC, he was intrigued by the Cultural and Structural Change process, to bring systems of accountability and shared leadership, and build capacity for effective engagement in Australia today. 'I wanted to be part of that future,' said Paul. 'I have long been a supporter. This gave me a chance to get involved.'

As Paul's pie-charts demonstrated, the budget is built around decentralised financial decision-making in the

seven portfolios, each of which combines serving full-time workers with newer volunteers with specific skill-sets.

Paul's predecessor over the past two years, Ron Lawler, told the AGM that the budget aims to bring transparency in priorities and resource allocation. He pointed to the \$5 million investment fund, including some significant loans, largely inherited through the generosity and sacrifice of past generations.

'The alternative we faced,' said Ron, 'was to be an assets-rich and people-poor organisation that runs the occasional program or initiative with a few people involved.'

While holding to IofC's strength of dedicated volunteers, Council has decided to invest in an 'infrastructure of human resources and administration' capable of meeting the opportunities arising. This may produce a deficit of \$200,000 or more during each of the next two years until new sources of income are generated from programs and training.

The Cultural and Structural Change process aims 'to maintain the essence of the heritage while reaching into the modern world with new tools, good process, and actioning new opportunities,' said Ron.

Comments and questions can be addressed to treasurer@au.iofc.org

Forgiveness that ‘walks its talk’

Twenty-three years after her daughter died in a hail of gunfire, South African Ginn Fourie brought her story of pain, forgiveness and peace-building to audiences in Australia.

Ginn’s daughter, Lyndi, was 23 years old when black ‘Freedom Fighters’ stormed a Cape Town pub, killing four civilians. Through searching out and forming an alliance with the man who had ordered the violence, Letlapa Mphahlele, Ginn demonstrated a commitment that goes *Beyond Forgiving*—as the film depicting her story is called.

Now living in Margaret River, WA, Ginn used the film to open up dialogues at events in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney from 6-12 June. The program was arranged by the Creators of Peace network, to raise funds to support women from Fiji, Indonesia and Afghanistan going to the 25th anniversary of Creators of Peace conference in Caux, Switzerland.*

‘When a film moves an audience of 80 people to a hushed silence after it ends, you know something has touched their hearts,’ wrote Tanya Fox. ‘This is exactly what resulted after the viewing of *Beyond Forgiving* at the Sydney Fundraiser on 12 May.’

‘Those of us who had the privilege to spend time with Ginn, have been touched by her down-to-earth unassuming warm personality. I’m a different person for having met her. She is a woman who truly walks her talk.’

A highlight of her time in Sydney was when Dorothy Makasa, one of the Creators of Peace network, invited Ginn to meet 30 of her colleagues at the Catholic Mission in North Sydney. These educators have developed a workshop in which they use role plays of characters in the film to see how students would deal with similar scenarios. Ginn was moved by the way they are using the film as an experiential teaching tool of forgiveness.



Ginn Fourie in Adelaide

In Adelaide, the dialogue with 84 people after the film immediately went deep, several people relating Ginn’s experience of forgiving to situations of pain and injustice they have struggled with. A concluding comment was, ‘Thank you Ginn, you have helped me to see that I can be something more than I have been.’

Someone asked about justice and vengeance? Ginn told how she faced the three young men who did the killing during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When their sentences were commuted from 25 years to only four, she did not object. ‘Vengeance is not my business, but the court’s. I had already given up my justifiable right to revenge. I had forgiven them.’

In Melbourne, 63 people joined the dialogue at Armagh, facilitated by Saara Sabbagh of Benevolence Australia, a Muslim community organization that seeks to foster harmony. Saara related Ginn’s forgiving to the situation in Syria, her country of origin, realising the huge challenge that it presents.

** The fundraising events have netted over \$12,000. Caroline Edwards and friends are raising funds for two Afghan women separately, Rosemary Thwaites for two Pakistanis. Another \$3000 is needed for these delegations. Contributions can be made through IofC Australia, address on page 4.*

Australia’s unfinished nationhood

On 11 May, the Jubilee Room in the NSW Parliament House was packed with 100 people for a ‘conversation’ on ‘Australia’s unfinished nationhood’. One of the facilitators, Graeme Cordiner, used IofC’s logo to illustrate the spiritual journey of healing from denial and trauma to acceptance, to actions already happening which give a vision of what a healed nationhood would look like.

Hosted by the ‘Sydney Friends of Myall Creek’, the meeting heard 14 fourteen speakers raising awareness of Australia’s frontier wars. A booklet was launched, listing the hundreds of massacres across Australia from 1788 to the 1940s. It had been compiled in collaboration with the Tent Embassy in Canberra.

Speakers included the Parliamentary host, Shadow Attorney General Paul Lynch, Indigenous people remembering the Myall Creek and Appin massacres, an Indigenous lecturer on trauma studies at the University of Wollongong, and a woman tracing the holocaust

recognition journey in Germany. A teacher spoke of ‘rivers of reconciliation’ in his school where all Year 7s learn the local indigenous language.

‘The cumulative impact was overwhelming,’ reported Graeme. ‘We all felt we were caught up in the presence of something larger than us or one event. It brought to my mind the Indigenous elder from Central Australia who told me there is a spiritual awakening taking place in Australia, and it is arising from the grassroots among First Nations peoples, not only in Australia but around the world, reaffirming the values of community, respect for eternal law and wisdom of the elders, connection with the land. Values that as a world we so sorely need to re-find and honour.’

Rwanda to Brisbane to Bandung

In April Francine Berabose, a Congolese-Australian raised in Rwanda, went with Barbara Lawler to assist IofC Indonesia to prepare the 22nd Asia Pacific Youth Conference (APYC), taking place in Bandung, 6-13 August. Having worked as a counsellor in refugee resettlement, Francine is studying psychology at Bond University, Queensland. She reports:

This, my first visit to Indonesia, was an opportunity to learn from the incredible work being done by IofC Indonesia, which is made up of mainly young people like myself.

Our diverse international team – including Altaf Khan and Mayur Shah from IofC India and Cheng Ng from Malaysia – created a vibrant atmosphere.

Through the efforts of Miftahul Huda and his wife, Nenden, we spoke at a range of events and talked with influential individuals, such as: Inayah Wahid, daughter of late president

(an alumni of APYC 2004 in Cambodia), Irakli Khodeli, a UNESCO program specialist (an alumni of IofC's Caux Scholars Program), and Abdul Mukti, Secretary General of Central Board of Muhammadiyah (one of the world's largest Muslim organisations).

At a Creators of Peace event in Jakarta, I had an opportunity to share my life story with 20 women. In that safe environment, I learned great life lessons from women's stories of resilience and courage.

We made presentations at three universities in Bogor and Bandung. I am glad that I was able to contribute my experience, knowledge and personal life story of Rwanda's journey to forgiveness and reconciliation after the 1994 Tutsi genocide. Students asked many questions.



Francine (centre) and Barbara with Indonesian hosts and Indian colleagues at the Harakatul Jannah Mosque in Bogor, south of Jakarta.

As someone who has only been involved for 17 months, the time with this international team in Indonesia taught me so much about IofC as an organization.

I am grateful for my mentor, Barbara Lawler, for introducing to me the work that she has been doing for the last decade in Indonesia, and am thankful for all the support that we received from IofC Australia.

Frank Buchman and the Germans

By Peter Thwaites, translator/editor of a new book:

'It sounds like about a month's work,' was my response in 2010 when asked by the head of IofC communications to translate Pierre Spoerri's manuscript, *Frank Buchman und die Deutschen*, in preparation for posting on the IofC website. A day later I wrote, 'I'd like to help.'

After five years of sometimes sporadic and sometimes intensive work, *Frank Buchman and the Germans* has now been published in print by Caux Books.

'Comment is free but facts are sacred,' wrote a British newspaper editor. The raw material of history must be presented as accurately as possible. The devil is in the detail but so is the beauty. Chasing up and verifying many details meant slower work, but it could not be avoided and finally led me to many treasures. A translator's first need is to understand in enough depth the text he or she is translating.

Spoerri began his research into the history of Buchman's work in Germany some 40 years ago. His papers, now lodged in the Vaud Cantonal Archives in Lausanne, include a large 'Germany' collection with many personal letters to

and from Buchman and documents such as Nazi secret police reports about the Oxford Group.

These documents formed the basis for Spoerri's narrative. Last year I spent four days exploring them, and another five days consulting the IofC archives in Oxford's Bodleian Library. To my joy, these visits provided the last answers to questions that needed answering in order to produce an accurate English version of the book.

The book focuses on the period 1920-1950, a time of ongoing crisis in Europe after World War I. Extreme political ideologies of right and left competed to fill the vacuum of belief, while the Oxford Group emerged with its concept of a new world through people's inner change. It gained international attention, but in Germany Buchman's attempts to reach the Nazi leadership with this message and thus avert a second war failed. After World War II, particularly through the first Caux conferences, he and his team were among the first to welcome Germany back into the family of nations.

Copies of the book can be ordered through iofc.publications@au.iofc.org

See also the Initiatives of Change Australia website: www.au.iofc.org Facebook page: Initiatives of Change Australia

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New subscriptions and address changes: NEWSBRIEFS, 226 Kooyong Road, Toorak, VIC 3142 E-mail: office.manager@au.iofc.org