RELIGIOUS DIFFERENTIATION AND RELIGIOUS REVITALISATION

CHANGE INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

ABSTRACT

Religion has returned to the social policy agenda following the events of September 11, 2001. Gary Bouma argues that religion has become much more diverse and is being revitalised in many parts of the world. Bouma says this has greatly increased the challenge of managing religious diversity, promoting healthy religious intergroup relations and dealing with religious competition and conflict. These processes and challenges take particular forms in the Asia-Pacific.

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Religion has come back on to the social policy agenda since September 11, 2001. Policy makers, educators, and law enforcement agents now seek out information about religions and have become worried about the potential of mismanaged religious diversity disrupting the day to day workings of their societies. Since the end of the Cold War two processes have been transforming the relationship between religion and society – religious diversification and religious revitalisation. These processes were occurring but below the threshold of public notice from the mid 1970s through the 1980s and early 1990s. Together they are changing the way religious groups relate to each other, with their social and cultural environments and thus must also affect the way we think about religion and the ways societies think about managing religious diversity.

The Diversification of Religion

Four forms of differentiation have radically transformed religious life. First, secularization has witnessed the decline of the power and membership of what were mainline religious groups, particularly in the West. But this decline has masked another more profound change. Religious and spiritual life has slipped out from the control of once hegemonic religious organizations. As a result they are now freely available in myriad forms requiring much less commitment and take often much less organized, or very differently organised forms.

Secondly, migration and conversion have brought unfamiliar religions to many places, placed religions that previously dealt with each other only in stereotypes into direct relationship, and with globalization have brought the widest diversity of religious teaching and practice to every corner of the world. Not only are there now more religious groups in Australia today than ever before, but also each group is much less homogeneous than it was before.

Third, there has been an increased differentiation between church and state, *i.e.* between religious groups and the state. Take the example of Osama bin Laden. In this case religious action has had global consequence without the offices or agency of a state. Religion has become a force outside the structures of statecraft, effective without the trappings of state. In Australia religious groups have moved further from direct association with government while at the same time religious welfare organisations have become largely dependent on state funding as the state has chosen to channel funds through state based organisations.

Fourth, there has been increased congregationalism, or conversely, the decline of national or regional organizational structures to pattern religious belief and practice. Separate congregational organizations with limited networks and no collective organ of responsibility are replacing once strong and vertically integrated Christian denominations. Of course, religious groups like Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and others have long lived without the kinds of organizational structures that characterised Christendom.

The diversification of religion has also being occurring within religious groups. During the late 20th Century this process has gone so far that religious diversity is often found to be at least as great within religious groups as between them. Some refer to this as the death of denominationalism. For example, the internal diversity of Anglicans is legendary, even if stretched to the breaking point by current debates. The Charismatic movement has cut across denominational lines as has liberalism, social concern, and evangelicalism. It is no longer possible to speak of the Anglican, or the Uniting, or the Catholic point of view. But within group religious diversity is also evident in the different ways Muslims

give expression to their faith in the one God, or the differences in the practices and theologies of Buddhists, Hindus or any other religious group.

The consequence of the diversification of religious groups has been to render them much more difficult to manage by those who would promote healthy inter-religious relations and reduce conflict. For example, Australia's religious organisations have become so diverse that religious diversity is much less able to be managed by this society than it once was. For example, in 1947 the Prime Minister of Australia would have had to make only two phone calls to speak with religious leaders who represented over half the population and one more would have enabled him to reach nearly 70 per cent. He would now have to make many more calls and none of those whom he called would be able to speak clearly about what their people believed or did. This story can be repeated among the nations of the Asia Pacific. Diversity within and between religious groups has greatly reduced the capacity of these older structures to deliver social cohesion.

Increased diversity by itself does not pose a threat to a society. I have been studying the management of religious diversity for over three decades. What has become clear to me is that religious diversity is not a disease to be overcome, but a cultural resource that can be used to enrich the capacity of a society to operate effectively in a global context. In addition religious diversity is not a problem needing to be transcended by finding something everyone will agree to, or by showing that there is great similarity among the beliefs of different groups. First, the differences between groups are real, not to be trivialised and can become sources of conflict. Secondly, those who think they have transcended religious differences in fact are proposing yet another religious perspective, belief system or group and are increasing diversity, not reducing it.

Finally, it has again become clear that not all expressions of religion are 'moderate', innocuous or, for that matter, even safe. Some forms of religious expression found as minority perspectives within some religious groups can be considered 'toxic' as they reduce the humanity of some of their members, erode human community and impair our ability to live together in peace and mutual respect. It is naïve to ignore the possible harm some expressions of religious life can have and since the notion that religion is withering away is no longer tenable the management of religious diversity becomes more critical.

The Revitalisation of Religion

Who last century would have predicted the level of interest in religion and spirituality today? Actually it was predicted but no one listened and everyone looked where they had long looked – to the 'mainstream' Christian churches and only saw decline and aging. But suddenly religion and spirituality are back. I speak of religion and spirituality because both are back. For a while it seemed that perhaps being spiritual might remain while more organised forms of spirituality - churches, mosques, temples, synagogues would decline. Any consideration of the present condition of religious and spiritual life in the Asia Pacific requires attention to both spirituality and participation in religious organisations.

Even formally organised religion has been gathering strength in a variety of ways. Since World War II, religion was assumed by most trained in the social sciences to be at most innocuous, usually irrelevant and likely to disappear by the end of the 20th Century. The events of September 11 put paid to those assumptions and expectations. Osama bin Laden is not seeking social justice. He and a small group of others like him want to establish what they consider a theologically pure form of Islam, first by imposing it on Muslims and then on the rest of the world. No one event has so clearly established the return of religion to significance in global human life as the attacks of September 11, 2001. But there had been significant signs before, probably starting with the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the subsequent reign of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the rise of the Christian right in the United States, and the surge of Pentecostalism through Africa, Latin America and Asia.

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But reference to religiously inspired terrorism draws attention away from a more basic religious process that has been re-shaping religion for several decades – religious revitalisation. Religious revitalisation has been sweeping the globe. Religious revitalisation occurs when some religious groups or sections of them increase the intensity of their practice and belief. From an Australian perspective this is most noticeably occurring in Islam in Indonesia, Iran, Iraq and elsewhere. Then there is also the Christian Right, much noticed in the USA, but also Latin America, Africa, and parts of the Asia Pacific.

Religious revitalisation is a well known process that is part of the processes involved in the ebb and flow of the strength and appeal of religion and spirituality. However, most policy makers have little experience of or training in religion. The reigning secularist hegemony in universities made the study of religion; particularly living religions seem obsolete and irrelevant. Religion was supposed to fade away according to Freud and Marx. But far from fading away it is back with renewed strength.

While many secularist analysts keep trying to do so, revitalisation cannot be reduced to other explanations – concern for social justice, poverty or ignorance. Those who flew the planes into the Twin Towers were not ignorant, poor or concerned for social justice. Similarly the Christian right are not ignorant, or poor, nor are they motivated by social justice. They are both technologically well advanced on

liberal Christians, using latest cell phone technology, the web, satellite television networks and advanced audio systems to proclaim a gospel of 21st century of success and acquisition.

Revitalised religion is a religion of the aspiring middle class, groups seeking to improve their status or conditions in a society. It always has been. It is a now clearly discredited Marxist inspired myth that religion is primarily for the poor. Religious revitalisation emerges as a mechanism to assist those making the transition from poverty to middle class, from traditional economies and cultures to industrial forms of society. Revitalised religions provide legitimations for new found wealth of the recently up-wardly mobile. They provide clear norms and rules for people who find themselves cut loose from their roots in traditional communities. Revitalised religions are often associated with the introduction and acceptance of free market economies. They are ready to compete in a world of conflicting religious ideas and practices.

Moreover, revitalised religions have moved back into the public sphere of politics seeking to re-shape not only their own religious groups, but also their entire societies. Revitalised religions tend to be more hard-edged; pursuing, offering and demanding moralities of purity and exclusivity. The Christian right is only one example. Targeting moral issues of abortion, family definitions, and sexual morality this group has also sought to shape U.S. foreign policy. Wahabbist theology has prompted the political action of some Muslim groups including Osama.

However, engagement is a two edged sword. While religious conservatives will have an impact on other sectors of the society, engagement leads to a loss of purity. Engagement requires compromise, listening and the formation of alliances which in time erode the purity positions of radical religious groups bringing them closer to more widely accepted positions and the acceptance of greater diversity.

Thus the larger context of interreligious relations in the Asia Pacific is now shaped by the revitalisation of several religious groups. This revitalisation challenges Western liberal secular notions of the place and action of religion in ways that make the work of promoting harmonious interreligious relations and understanding more difficult. The religious and spiritual life of Australia has become not only more vital, but also much more diverse through revitalisation, migration and conversion. Religion is no longer tied up in the neat packages that were characteristic of religions before.

As a consequence of these changes religion in the Asia Pacific is also more prone to conflict; both conflict within and between religious groups as well as increased tension between them and other groups. As a result of migration, mobility and globalisation religious groups which previously existed in isolation from each other are now more likely to contact others who are different. The likelihood of conflict is also increased by the presence of intensified ideologies of conflict stemming from residual and renewed Christian missionary zeal, new found Pentecostal zeal, Wahabbist theologies of Islamic purity and domination, as well as conflicting political interests. Theologies of purity are exclusivist, often denying the right to exist of those deemed to be in error.

Religious revitalisation and increased religious conflict make the Asia Pacific a very different context for promoting harmonious living together. Revitalised religions do not presuppose the liberal, laissez-faire values basic to much of Western education. They do not commence interactions with other on the basis of mutual respect, but they move with suspicion. They do not commence with aims of inclusivity, but preach exclusivity. They commence with a negative assessment of difference, resistance to multicultural policies and a readiness to condemn those with whom they disagree including most vociferously those of their own groups. This poses a huge challenge to those who do operate from values of inclusion, fairness, openness, tolerance, and who view diversity positively.

This situation poses particular challenges to those who argue that reference to and inculcation of universal values will overcome the differences behind the conflicts. The problem with saying that humans ' share certain universal values' is that while they may be similar, or seem to be from outside, these values do not hang in space but are grounded in difference, in different communities, histories, traditions, and religious belief and practice. What are the bases for shared values? Yes there are values that seem to be shared and universal. We must remember that shared values are not shared because they are similar, or universal; they are shared by social groups that survive, because such values are essential to survival, to sustainability. Any group that survives a few generations will promote sustainable values – mutual respect, regard for the environment, forgiveness, readiness to understand, willingness to seek the common good and others. The divisive values of puritanical groups are not sustainable, which is part of why they do not survive long, but radically moderate their extreme views and adopt more sustainable values in the longer run, or die out. However, the promotion of shared values may well be inimical to conservative, revitalising religions; because of necessity such an approach undermines the very differences they seek to emphasise. It relativises the absolute truth claims they make.

In this context governments need to take great care to manage religious diversity in ways that promote mutual respect and understanding. It is not possible to repress religion and spirituality. Secularity is not neutral, but is another ideological viewpoint. The critical issue is the promotion of social solidarity through cooperation not the elimination of difference. Whatever it is, it is no longer possible to ignore the impact of religion on social life in the Asia Pacific.

Note

This article is a revision of earlier comments made at a Conference on Religion in the Future of Multicultural Societies held in Prato, Italy in September 2004; a UNESCO conference on Shared Values for Intercultural and Interreligious Understanding held in Adelaide in Nov 2004, a further UNESCO conference on Religion in Conflict and Peace Conference held in Melbourne in April 2005 and in my final report to the Christian Research Association and other addresses given recently. Some parts of this article have appeared in other publications including *Australian Mosaic: A Journal Of The Federation Of Ethnic Communities*' Councils Of Australia January 2005 and a UNESCO Report.