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SECULAR GOVERNMENT AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

A Regional Asia-Pacific Initiative

Introduction

Among the many aspects of religion within the Southeast Asia and Pacific region that today command attention, two things stand out. The first is that there is a very full and rich diversity of religious identity, expression, and life in the region (Bouma, Ling, and Pratt 2010). Indeed, the religious milieu of most constituent nations is impressively variegated. And within the region as a whole, as well as within the nations that comprise it, no one religion pre-dominates overall, although three world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—are variously dominant. But these three are themselves undeniably situated within multi-faith milieux, even where they command majority alle-giance. Plurality rules; religious diversity is the norm. The second aspect com-manding attention is that the attitude of the states, or of governments, within the region vis-à-vis religion is undergoing change. At the very least, this reli-gious diversity requires a measure of management, and religion has re-emerged in recent times as a key factor in respect not just to communal identity but also to intercommunal and social harmony—or disruption where things go awry. In some instances, the requisite change faced by the state is quite significant. This is because, in broad terms, the political context of religion throughout the re-gion is that of secularity: none of the countries is a religious state as such, even though in some cases one religion may have special status as being the *de jure* faith of the land. But, even so, other religions are allowed for. Indeed, the re-gion contains all the world's major faiths, along with a host of minor but lo-cally significant ones. The role of religion in the region is very important, and this importance is endorsed by respective governments on behalf of a wider society. To be sure, there are many examples of community conflict in which religion is a factor, and many other instances of successful religious tolerance and pluralist coexistence. Governments are vitally interested in the amelior-ation of the one and the active promotion of the other.

It is within this context that, beginning in 2004 as a result of the initiative of the governments of Australia and Indonesia, a series of Southeast Asia and Pa-

cific regional interfaith dialogue forums, involving government-level nom-
inated representative teams of religious and community leaders, has taken
place. These forums, meeting more or less annually, have engaged in a mix of
plenary presentation and discussions, work-groups, caucusing and networking.
Senior political figures have participated alongside the faith and community
leaders. This paper investigates the wider context for the development and
rationale of these regional interfaith dialogues and reviews the meetings that
have been held thus far. A picture emerges of a radically changed and chan-
ging relationship between religion and politics: faith communities and the gov-
ernments of the societies in which these communities are set are working at a
new modus vivendi. Interreligious dialogue has a new champion. But before
examining what has taken place, we need to consider the wider political con-
text in which this innovative development is set.

State-Religion Relations

The modern Western political ideal of the separation of the powers of religion
from those of the state is the widespread norm. Nevertheless, three broad pat-
terns may be discerned as applying within the region in respect to the relation
of religion and the state: secular divide, benign secularity, and secular contract.
This socio-political analysis is different from the threefold sociophilosophical
analysis advanced by Karel Dobbelaere where the "secular" is opposed to the
"sacred," suggesting "a cultural emancipation from religion, and church that is
more or less open but quite often closed to faith" (2002: 23). But Dobbledaere
does acknowledge the political dimension wherein the concepts of secularism
and secularity "are used to promote a certain policy, a certain program" (2002:
23). By contrast, Steve Bruce (2002: 3; cf. Berger and Luckman 1966) defines
secularization as

a social condition manifest in (a) the declining importance of religion for the operation
of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy; (b) a
decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the
extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind,
and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.

On the one hand, Bruce (2002: 17) acknowledges the difference between the
pragmatic process of the separation of church and state, and the sheer cultural
and cognitive breakdown between the community and the religious worldview
as manifest in the state suppression of religion. On the other hand, he is clear
that religion "often provides resources for the defence of a national, local, eth-
nic or status-group culture" (2002: 31). The relation between religion and state
may—and does—take many forms, some more positive than others. Even
though, to the secular mindset, "religion appears as a choice or an arbitrary cir-
cumstance" (Atchley 2009: 2), the point is that, today, this mindset is increas-

ingly challenged by the sheer persistence and, in many quarters, predominance of religion and religious sensibilities.

Heretofore the three religion-state relations I am referring to have all variously described and/or constrained the relationship of religion(s) to the wider society. But all of them are undergoing adjustment in response to contemporary changes in the world of religion and the need to take fresh account of that. The setting of an aggressive secular divide prefers to see religion wholly absent from the public sphere and political discourse—here secularism is "closed to faith" and is to be contrasted with a more benign secularity that is open to faith but cultivates "a carefully and self-critical … base of neutrality which withholds judgments" (Marty 1964: 165). The former secularism, rather than the latter secularity, is certainly the historical context of Australia and New Zealand, for example. Here the media will emblazon the sins of a fallen priest but ignore the saintly work of hundreds. Good news is not good news; only bad news is newsworthy. The ideology of such secularism is hostile to religion and actively seeks to limit, denigrate, and neutralize any potential influence of religion within the public domain.

By contrast, other countries in the region, such as Pacific Island nations, could be said to be marked by a comparatively benign secularity. Here, while there is a clear division of responsibilities and sphere of influence between religion and state, there is not the underlying current of an aggressive secularism; rather the religious dimension of life is more overtly present within the public sphere and more likely to be regarded benignly, even positively, by the apparatus of the State and the leadership of the nation. On the other hand, some Southeast Asian nations—such as Malaysia and Indonesia—while being identified as nations of a particular religion (Islam) are politically constituted nonetheless as secular states whereby religion, including the dominant one, is situated within the context of a secular social contract: rights, privileges, and responsibilities are clearly spelled out by law. So long as the contract is upheld, religion is honoured. However, in all three situations—secular divide, benign secularity, and secular social contract—significant change is taking place. Governments are taking notice of the religious dimension in a new way. If it was thought that religion was safely in its place, suddenly, it seems, religion is to be taken account of, responded to, and interacted with in a wholly new fashion.

The significant factor that marks the end of the first decade of the 21st century, as compared to the closing decades of the 20th, is that religion is seen to matter in a comparatively new way: religious identity, expression, and life are no longer confinable to the private sphere on the one hand nor benignly accepted or neatly ordered on the other. Religion impacts upon, contributes to, and is varyingly constitutive of, wider public life. Even despite changes taking place

within the religious milieu—resurgent exclusivist identities, emergent extremisms, aggressive political interventions, to name but a few—a new order is undeniably abroad. The old modes of construing religion vis-à-vis wider society and its governance are being rethought. Whereas previously the social problems created by religious diversity were ameliorated by virtue of rending religion socially invisible, or at least marginal, today religion commands new attention. Today, by and large, states are taking notice of their religious dimension in a quite new way.

For societies where the ideology of an assertive secularism has held sway, this development is arguably the most striking and challenging. But there are inherent challenges that impact on all, nonetheless. One response, which is manifest in various ways, is the emergence of a new interfaith discourse: not only are religions talking with and to one another in a variety of contexts, this inter-religious activity is now regarded as an important plank in the quest for enhanced social relations and the advancement of intercommunal harmony. For community identity is very often tied in to religious identity; intercommunal conflict is often also interreligious; and the route to communal coexistence is through religious détente: the road to peace is paved by dialogue between religions. And so it was that, with the irruption into the Southeast Asia region of religion-sponsored terrorist violence as a consequence of the Bali bombings and following on from the infamy of 9/11, and the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005, an initiative emerged aimed at bringing religious and community leaders together from throughout the Southeast Asia and Pacific region, with a view to fostering intercommunal harmony through interfaith dialogue, and to involve government both within that process and as a recipient of recommendation, advice, and guidance to arise from it.

Regional Interfaith Dialogue

The aim of the Asia-Pacific regional interfaith dialogue meetings is to bring together representatives of the region's different faith groups, and other community leaders, in order to foster mutual understanding of beliefs and practices and to explore common purposes and projects. In part, the motivation for this regional series of dialogue events can be traced to Resolution 60/10 of the United Nations General Assembly issued in November, 2005, namely a resolution advocating the promotion of interreligious dialogue and cooperation for peace. The regional hope is that interreligious dialogue could contribute to understanding, tolerance, and respect for one another's beliefs, and so assist in the promotion of good relations among the various faith communities and cultures of the region's nations.

Significantly, post 9/11 the concept of interfaith dialogue as a community or government-sponsored and endorsed activity, as opposed to simply one driven

by the interests and concerns of faith communities themselves, has been attracting growing support around the world. Variations on this phenomenon can be found elsewhere, of course. A number of regional and multilateral interreligious initiatives involving some form of dialogical conversation and the quest for common-action responses to local and regional concerns, along with broader intercultural and inter-civilizational initiatives, are well underway with many at the behest of UN agencies. Many countries see these dialogical and especially allied educational developments as a way of countering radicalization and recruitment by terrorists, and thereby addressing some of the underlying causes of terrorism. The Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue series, as an ongoing concern, aims to strengthen regional security by providing a channel for discussion amongst the major faith and community groups of, currently, some fifteen countries in the Southeast Asian and South Pacific region. Its objective is to promote a culture of peace and tolerance among the different religions of the region and to strengthen the position of religious moderates.

Dialogue Forum 1: Yogyakarta, 2004

The first of these regional interfaith dialogue forums was held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 6-7 December 2004, and took place also under the aegis of ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations. It brought together delegations from ten faith and community leaders from 14 countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, namely from Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam. Malaysia was represented by one observer sent from its embassy in Jakarta. The forum theme was "Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation," and it was opened with addresses by the President of Indonesia, Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the Australian Foreign Minister, the Hon Alexander Downer, MP, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr N. Hassan Wirajuda, together with Professor Syafii Ma'arif, the Chairman of Indonesia's Muhammadiyah. A tone of hopeful expectancy was set. Plenary sessions and work groups dealt with key challenges facing communities in the region, national case studies on building harmonious communities, empowering religious—especially Muslim—moderates, and seeking the way forward for fostering intercommunal harmony. In his address the President of the Republic of Indonesia stressed that the solution to intercommunal relations in the region was not to deny the reality of differences but to affirm a deeper, greater and more important reality, that of our common humanity.

The forum was unique in that, for the first time, governments in the region had cooperatively initiated and engaged in interfaith discussions focussed— appropriately—on matters of security, a concern that affects all countries. The forum underscored the importance of intra-regional cooperation at all levels. From the

perspective of delegations that attended, the success of the gathering was in its being another important step in strengthening regional interdependence and cooperation. Furthermore, the religious dimension of national and social life was now being addressed and taken seriously as a key component of regional social and political affairs. The main focus, as mentioned, was security in the region and the promotion of interfaith activities as a means of strengthening solidarity against extremism and so the likelihood of resultant terrorism. For this to be accomplished, it was made clear at this forum that there needs to be awareness-raising at many levels of society, not just about security but also about the nature of religious diversity within our region and the need to work for intercommunal harmonious relations in that respect. In some countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, the opening decade of the 21st century has seen an upsurge in the variety and frequency of interfaith activities of both a bilateral and multilateral nature. Many multireligious interfaith forums, councils, and allied bodies had already come into existence, of course. For the most part this had happened during the latter half of the 20th century. However, by and large such development had not taken place within an explicit national framework for conducting or encouraging interfaith cooperation and dialogue as such. This is now changing, and the change coincides with the emergence of the government-backed regional interreligious dialogue forums and the like. But for many, such interfaith initiatives are a novel experience. It was clear, for instance, that for some of the participants from ASEAN countries at the Yogyakarta forum the very fact of face-to-face interreligious dialogue was a unique event and constituted for them a ground-breaking experience.

This first forum addressed not just the issue of relationships between faith communities in the region but also that which obtains, or ought to obtain, between governments and national and regional faith communities. This led the meeting to reflect on the absences of such national and regional frameworks, together with the important contribution a robust relationship between faith communities and governments at the national and regional level could make to peace, security, human rights, and social justice. It was noted that while there are established bilateral and international vehicles for dialogical contact, the exchange of people, resources, and ideas in respect to aid, education, trade, development, immigration processes, and the like, there is no parallel framework for interfaith relations and cooperation. It was argued and agreed that such a vehicle could play an essential and unique role in bridging the knowledge gaps between different faith communities, with the hope of lessening tensions where they exist. The dialogue members were of the view that there is good cause for governments, nationally and regionally, to confer with faith communities in the same way they do, for example, with business, environmental, scientific, and educational or human rights institutions and key person-

nel. Such consultation may be regarded as part of the overall process of developing an inclusive society.

The forum agreed that religious dialogue between the major religions of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, together with smaller and indigenous religions, is a vital ingredient in achieving and sustaining regional peace and security (New Zealand Delegation Report, 2004). All these religions have their own regional characteristics that, to some extent, can contribute a distinctive perspective to the global interaction between religions. The Yogyakarta forum thus strongly endorsed the continuation of regional interfaith dialogue and engagement between faith communities and ASEAN/Pacific governments collectively. It is at the regional level that faith communities have a particular contribution to make towards peace, security, human rights and social justice. Furthermore, at the conclusion of this forum the Indonesian and Australian governments made a joint announcement about the establishment of a "Centre for Study and Cooperation" in Yogyakarta. This was discussed within the forum itself, which supported the proposal as part of an overall plan to promote such study and cooperation at the national level more widely across the region. And following the Yogyakarta forum, a delegation from Fiji was invited to join in order to increase Pacific representation.

The 15 countries that have taken part in subsequent dialogues include Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor L'Este, and Vietnam. Significantly, these nations together comprise 620 million people and are configured as follows:

- seven nations with under ten million people (Fiji, NZ, PNG, Singapore, Timor, Brunei, Lao)
- three nations with 20-50 million people (Australia, Cambodia, Malaysia)
- four nations with 50-100 million people (Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam)
- one nation with 245 million people (Indonesia)

Three nations have a Muslim majority (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei), five have a Buddhist majority (Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao, Thailand, Myanmar), six have a Christian majority (Philippines, Australia, NZ, Fiji, PNG, Timor L'Este), and one has no single majority (Singapore). Taken together, these 15 nations comprise approximately 244 million Muslims, 151 million Christians, 149 million Buddhists, 7 million Hindus, and 71 million other religions/no religion.

Dialogue Forum 2: Cebu, 2006

The second forum, sponsored by the governments of Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, was held in Cebu, the Philippines, from 14-16 March 2006, under the title of "Dialogue on Regional Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity." The work of the forum focussed on four workshops: the role of the media in promoting interfaith cooperation, interfaith cooperation for regional peace and security, human dignity, development, and interfaith cooperation, and the role of education in promoting interfaith cooperation. During the course of this forum the New Zealand delegation (New Zealand Delegation Report, 2006) initiated and convened informal regional "intra-faith" meetings of Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim participants, and a meeting of Pacific region delegates (Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Timor L'Este). Bilateral discussions were also arranged with delegations from most other participating countries. These sorts of additional activities and initiatives indicate something of the worth and value of the regional forums—the opportunity for appropriate networks to evolve and for new developments, compatible with the overall aim and intention of the regional interreligious dialogues, to emerge. The forum concluded with the adoption of the Cebu Declaration on Regional Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity. The Declaration was largely based on the key outcomes of the four workshops and from statements made at the opening session of the conference. Apart from general sentiments in relation to peace and security, human dignity and development, education and the media, the Declaration identified a number of follow-up actions that it enjoined the participating governments to heed (Cebu Declaration, 2006).

The statement of the president of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, noted the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation for regional peace and development, and asserted the view that faith has to do with primordial needs in the human condition in respect of hope, confidence, courage, together with a commitment to lead a good life on which the family, society, and civilization are based. Arroyo's statement was warmly endorsed by the Dialogue Forum. Commitments to the continuation and strengthening of the regional interreligious dialogue process given by high-ranking government representatives from New Zealand, the Philippines, Australia, and Indonesia were clearly articulated. Statements reflecting the great potential and power of faith to bring together peoples of different races, cultures, and creeds in our shared pursuit of lasting peace in the region were affirmed. The Declaration went on to assert:

We believe that interfaith dialogue builds understanding, goodwill, and relationships across religions and among peoples,

We acknowledge that interfaith cooperation plays a central role in the fostering of peace and security in our region and that interfaith dialogue and cooperation are now an integral part of the national and international political landscape,

We recognize that believers, communities, and institutions exercise a distinct and vital role in the promotion of peace, development, and human dignity in this region,

We appreciate that interfaith dialogue and cooperation are essential in de-linking religions from all forms of terror,

We affirm that the key societal values that underpin successful interfaith understanding and cooperation include shared values of peace, harmony, tolerance, ethical standards and human rights,

We recognize the impact of the media on public opinion and their critical relationship to peace and harmony, interfaith and intercultural understanding, nation building, social cohesion and social responsibility,

We affirm that faith communities need to engage with the media, build relationships, provide them with news and information and enter into dialogue with them,

We believe that human beings have moral, spiritual and intellectual capacities which could be best developed towards the attainment of human dignity,

We believe that education at all levels and in various contexts can play a significant role in promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation,

We recognize the shared contribution of women and men towards interfaith education and the promotion of human dignity,

We recognize that to make interfaith education effective, the driving forces behind interfaith conflict need to be addressed.

Among other things, the Cebu Declaration encouraged the development of local, national, and regional interreligious dialogue forums and allied events for the purpose of enhancing interfaith and intercommunal relations and understanding. Governments were called on "to uphold freedom of religion and belief in ways that will encourage interfaith dialogue" and to engage in partnership with faith communities "in addressing violence and all forms of terror and in working for peace, development, and human dignity." And religious communities in the region were exhorted to work for greater mutual respect, sensitivity, and acceptance. Government action throughout the region in respect of policy-making and educational curricula requirements to incorporate values- and interfaith-based dimensions was also urged. Similarly, calls were made for appropriate training to be offered to key media personnel. The Declaration ended with the statement that

The participants in the Cebu Dialogue, characterized by many languages, cultures and religions, share a conviction that Interfaith Cooperation plays an essential role in the promotion of peace, development, and human dignity and that the Cebu Dialogue, exemplified by the spirit of cooperation, understanding and friendship provided a robust platform for our collective future.

It is clear, from this brief review of the outcome of the second regional interfaith dialogue, that there was a strongly unanimous assertion of aspirations, hopes, and intentions for the strengthening of interreligious relations within the nations of the region represented at the forum and a strong assertion of the place and role of religious life within the affairs of state.

Dialogue Forum 3: Waitangi, 2007

The third regional interfaith dialogue forum with the theme "Building Bridges" was held at Waitangi, in the Bay of Islands of New Zealand, on 29-31 May 2007, hosted by the New Zealand government (New Zealand Delegation Report, 2007). The key sponsoring governments were represented at the opening of the Waitangi dialogue by New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, Philippines' President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters, and Andri Hadi, representing the Indonesian Foreign Minister who was unexpectedly unable to attend. Delegates were provided with a copy of the then recently published (with support from UNESCO) New Zealand Statement on Religious Diversity. This statement, a direct result of the first regional interfaith dialogue forum at Yogyakarta, and in concert with the development of New Zealand's own annual National Interfaith Forums and regional interfaith councils, received considerable positive comment from attendees at the Waitangi forum. Furthermore, the Waitangi dialogue gathering had been preceded during the previous week by a high-level international symposium held in Auckland (23-24 May 2007) on the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations report.[1] The outcomes of this symposium were reported at Waitangi and formed the basis for one of the workshop sessions there.

In her opening address at Waitangi the New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, noted that the Alliance of Civilisations Report described the contemporary world as "alarmingly out of balance" such that "the need to build bridges between societies, to promote dialogue and understanding, and to forge the political will to address the world's imbalances has never been greater" (Clark 2007). The Australian government representative, The Hon Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs, noted that the benefits of globalization, such as freedom of movement, the presence of the internet, and the ubiquity of mo-

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[1] The Alliance of Civilisations is a global initiative, launched by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. It seeks to overcome fractures and tensions between societies and cultures and to offer genuine alternatives to the bleak prophecy of near inevitable conflict between civilizations as popularized by Samuel Huntingdon in the mid-1990s. In particular, it seeks to reduce the polarization between Islam and the West. It represents a wider and more global engagement with the same sorts of issues and concerns that have motivated the emergence of the Asia-Pacific regional dialogue forums.

bile phones, can be exploited by some in order to pit intolerance, violence, and extremism against tolerance, pluralism, and openness. However, such exploitation signals a challenge that makes us "more determined to pursue those values and policies that we believe should govern the conduct of relations between and among people" (Downer 2007). And in a substantial paper an Indonesian representative, Zainal Abidin Bagir, reflected on the almost standard interlinking of interfaith dialogue and the pursuit of peace, noting that in many parts of the world "peace among religions" seems hardly to exist, despite decades of dialogue (Bagir 2007). Is too much being asked of interfaith dialogue when it comes to issues of security and intercommunal harmony? Given realistic limits on what dialogue can achieve, Bagir argued the need for dialogue as the locus of conversation between peoples of different religious worldviews and cultural sensitivities. Interfaith dialogue remains the place to begin the quest for resolution of issues and the advancement of security and peace.

Once again, key elements of opening speeches were endorsed by the Forum's closing statement, the Waitangi Declaration: Third Regional Interfaith Dialogue Action Plan (Waitangi Declaration, 2007). These included calling on "responsible nations and people of good will to build bridges across the divides" of the participant societies, looking forward "to creating deeper interfaith ties within the region as together we work towards building bridges for a culture of peace," noting that although "each faith may walk alternative paths to explore the human and the divine… this is a shared journey that demonstrates the diversity and openness of our societies," and recognizing that never before had so many representatives from such a diversity of communities of faith gathered in Waitangi to create "greater mutual understanding and respect for each other." The Indonesian spokesperson highlighted the role of regional dialogue in connecting religious leaders and faiths across the region and called for bridges to be built at all levels of society. This Dialogue "has now taken root in history." The need to increase the representation of women and youth actively involved in the regional dialogue forums was noted, as also the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in the building of bridges between faith communities and between them and governments, in learning about each other through public education, religious education and media, and in the promotion of regional peace and achieving security. The Declaration included a Plan of Action that both echoed sentiments asserted in the previous two declarations (Yogyakarta and Cebu) and attempted to give a sharper sense of focus with respect to identifying concrete outcomes to be aimed for. Thus the plan ranged over actions designed to build intercommunal relations, encourage the development of appropriate educational strategies, and address the role and responsibility of the media in respect to religious and communal concerns and sensitivities.

In particular, faith groups and civil society were urged "to develop partnerships with each other and with governments to work for social and economic justice, minority empowerment, and reconciliation among conflicting groups within society" while at the same time "the strengthening of intra-faith dialogue and call for intra-faith dialogue sessions to become a formal part of the Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue process" was endorsed. Furthermore, "education about religions in the public curricula of all schools, including religious schools" was advocated and governments in the region were exhorted to "ensure through curriculum review that curricula meet guidelines for fairness, accuracy, and balance in discussing religious beliefs and that they do not denigrate any faith or its adherents." In respect to this educational focus, religious leaders, education policy makers, and interfaith civic organizations were encouraged "to work together to develop consensus guidelines for teaching about religions" together with "the implementation of media literacy programmes in schools, to help develop a discerning and critical approach to news coverage about religions by media consumers" as well as a call to the media "to include the coverage of religion in their voluntary codes of conduct."

Dialogue Forum 4: Phnom Penh, 2008

The fourth interfaith dialogue forum was hosted by the Cambodian government in Phnom Penh on 3-6 April 2008. The theme for this meeting was "Interfaith cooperation for peace and harmony." It was noted that the process of regional interfaith dialogue begun in Yogyakarta in 2004 had since contributed to stronger interfaith relationships both nationally and within the region, and had led to increases in interfaith activities at the grassroots level as well as to international exchanges, regional support for global interfaith initiatives, and initiatives in education programmes both nationally and between countries. It was also noted that the growth in trust that was evident between national delegations and among the participant representatives of diverse faith communities over the course of the four dialogues has contributed to an increasing commonality of purpose and a focus on practical action. Religious tensions in the region have decreased over this four-year period. While the regional interfaith dialogue process might have only been one contributing factor, it was thought to have made an undoubted positive contribution (New Zealand Delegation Report, 2008). Plenary sessions and workshops focused on a number of issues, including: Follow-up to the Waitangi Declaration and Action Plan; Achieving Security: Interfaith Action for Regional Peace, Security and Harmony (which included workshops on "security," "tolerance and understanding," "democracy and equal opportunity," "solidarity and cooperation," and "conflict resolution and peacemaking"), Nurturing Initiatives at the Grassroots Level, and Empowering Those Advocating Peace and Harmony (which included workshops on the role of faith groups, women's and community groups, civil society, and government, cooperation between the media, faith groups, and government,

and effective use of education to shape the attitudes of the young and the wider community). The forum concluded with the issuing of a Declaration (Phnom Penh Declaration, 2008) in which the participants declared a commitment

to work towards the following in conjunction with governments and other sectors of society:

A. multifaith dialogue and cooperation
B. peace as a sacred priority
C. increased participation by women and youth in interfaith dialogue
D. sharing with our communities successful examples of multifaith dialogue and cooperation and encouraging others to participate; and
E. interfaith cooperation that addresses issues of critical community concerns in our region such as poverty, HIV, human rights, environmental issues and natural disasters.

Following the lead of the 2007 Waitangi Declaration, the 2008 Phnom Penh Declaration contained a substantial "Action Plan" that ranged over relationships (country-to-country bilateral, continuing interfaith and intra-faith activities locally as well as regionally), education and capacity building (religious perspectives on human rights, curricula developments, etc.); conflict resolution and peace-building (utilizing religious resources, enhancing networks, joint projects, and information sharing); grassroots initiatives (referring to local community-building, extending the range and inclusiveness of the dialogue process especially in respect to women and youth); media and promoting interfaith understanding (balancing free speech with communal responsibility, the contribution of the media to education and positive communal enhancements, the need for training and resourcing media personnel).

In his opening address to the Phnom Penh gathering, the Hon Chris Carter, New Zealand Minister for Ethnic Affairs, expressed his personal view that "interfaith dialogue—driven by its overriding goal of promoting good relations, understanding, and respect amongst different faith communities—can make a real contribution to preventing or reducing conflict in our societies" (Carter 2008). This encapsulates both the rationale and the hope for this new regional interreligious and government-backed initiative. Furthermore, Carter stated of this series of Interfaith Dialogue that they concretely demonstrate

how civil society representatives can work together—and with their governments—to develop lines of trust and communication. The Dialogue encourages us to focus on the need for inclusion and respect for each other within our own diverse communities, so that no faith community feels marginalised or excluded. It assists us to see more clearly what is happening across the fault lines which exist within and between societies, and to understand better what can be done to bridge them.

Dialogue Forum 5: Perth, 2009

The fifth Asia Pacific Regional Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation in the series thus far was held in Perth, Australia, on 28-30 October 2009 with the theme of "Future Faith Leaders: Challenges and Cooperation." As with previous meetings, press releases speak of this regional dialogue series having gained momentum and being now "regarded by participating countries as having real potential to improve the longer-term prospects for mutual understanding and peace and security in the region" (Te Korowai Whakapono 2009). The aim of the series remains, of course, the promotion of understanding and cooperation among the different faith communities within the region. As a consequence, it is hoped that potential causes of religious and intercommunity tension can be addressed and ameliorated. The Perth event and its resultant Declaration focussed on the promotion of interfaith projects, the development of future faith leaders, the provision of educational resources on religious diversity, the involvement of faith community leaders in peace and conflict resolution, and addressing issues of religious diversity and the media.

In comparison with previous dialogue forums it is clear there is an emerging pattern of issues and concerns that require to be constantly addressed. As previously, the Declaration sets out recommendations for follow-up action by faith communities and governments. In his concluding address on 30 October, the Hon Stephen Smith, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, noted that global "economic, strategic and political influence is inexorably shifting to the Asia-Pacific (region)" (Smith 2009). The extent and effects of this shift are still being worked out; one has to do with religious diversity and the need to counter tendencies to extremism. It is undeniably the case that instances of communities within the region having been subject to "violence carried out in the name of religion" has been, and continues to be, of serious concern. But he noted that great efforts are being made within the region to counter such extremisms, and Indonesia was singled out for positive mention in that regard. Smith stated unequivocally that the regional interfaith dialogue series "is an important element of Australia's efforts to build interfaith dialogue both in our immediate region and beyond it" and he commented on the close working relationship Australia had with Indonesia with respect to two of the biggest Muslim community organizations in the world. Interfaith cooperation is contributing to agendas for communal and political stability. Smith asserted that, and as the Perth Document declares, "the true value of the Dialogue will be measured by the success with which words are translated into action": talk needs to issue in practical action to ensure "a more tolerant and harmonious society."

Conclusion

Time will tell to what extent this series of regional interfaith dialogue gatherings will result in sustained benefit to the nations involved. Certainly, at the very least, it demonstrates a new-found willingness of the organs of state to engage with the communities of faith that make up such a substantial proportion of the populations of the region and to acknowledge the place of religion, in all its diversity and complexity, within the structures of society and the quest for regional security, peace, and harmony. Furthermore, the advent of such a government-sponsored series of inter-religious events, albeit construed for broadly political rather than narrowly religious purposes, challenges the received tradition of secularity and the predominant ideology of secularism that has dominated the discourse and operating context of international relations. The times are a-changing; the relation of religion and politics is likewise undergoing change—hopefully for the betterment of both.

LITERATURE

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