

Third National Inter-Faith Forum, Wellington, NZ, 26/27 February 2006

Forum Summation Notes

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From the many rich contributions shared at this Forum, seven themes have stood out for me:

1. We are living in an age when there is a shifting of tectonic plates in terms of global clashes of civilisations. Such clashes can lead us into conflict and violence, or more positively into a new age of understanding and constructive engagement across the racial, cultural, religious and national boundaries which might otherwise divide us. The choice is ours, both as individuals and as nations, as to which path we take.
2. It is a natural human reality for us to fear the unknown. Such fear can cause us to retreat behind the ramparts, raise the draw-bridges and prepare for battle. There is a fear of change, a socio-cultural conservatism, which makes us want to cling to familiar ways. And there is a fear of loss of identity, whereby we fear that encountering the cultures and religions of others might cause our own to be diminished.
3. We should seek to overcome such fears and reach out and engage with others in a way that is open to discovering more of their faith and culture without losing our own. An English bishop once said we need to have a faith which has a firm centre but open edges. The engagement with others is not a threat to our own faith: in fact it can positively enrich it. Many encouraging examples of grass-roots engagements have been shared at this Forum. They are usually simple first steps that can be taken to meet others in one's own community. Some of them are set out on the excellent Directory of Interfaith and Ecumenical Activity in New Zealand just launched today. A proposal that study of other religions should become part of our state school curriculum has also been endorsed by Forum members.
4. I wonder how good we are as New Zealanders in sitting down and talking with those who are different from us, or with whom we disagree. It is often easier to toss missiles at each other by letter, e-mail or public attack and counter-attack, setting up enemies, and causing deep personal and cultural divides. Can we train our young, as well as ourselves, in strategies for conversation, dialogue, listening without being defensive, speaking without attacking, being open to new insights so that we build co-operative partnerships in the common challenges which face us?
5. A heart-warming feature of the Forum has been the recognition of how different faith communities have supported one another in the face of attacks such as the desecration of Jewish graves, the vandalising of mosques, hate mail directed to Somalis, and the recent media incidents relating to the Danish cartoons and South Park. It is recognised that a hurt sustained by one community is a hurt sustained by all, and we have stood together at such times.
6. We should encourage the best aspirations we share as human beings. Anjum Rahman said this morning that she believed the natural human inclination was to do good. I believe it is our role to nourish such inclinations and to create a favourable social climate in which they may thrive.
7. Finally, we should celebrate our achievements as a nation in community-building at home, and peace-making abroad. Our Prime Minister said this morning that we are a nation which encompasses all people, languages, cultures and religions. We should work to see that Aotearoa New Zealand grows strongly as a nation where our individual contributions are valued and included, and not diminished.

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