

# Being Faithful in Diversity

Gary D Bouma



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# Being Faithful in Diversity:

Religion and Social Policy  
in Multifaith Societies

The Lloyd Geering Lectures 2010

Gary D Bouma

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This book has grown out of my decades of work both as a researcher and a facilitator in the area of religious diversity. The support of my colleagues in the Australian Multicultural Foundation, Victorian Multicultural Commission, UNESCO, and The Global Terrorism Research Centre (Monash University) is acknowledged. This book also is an Australian contribution to the University of Ottawa based SSHRC funded Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Program 'Religious Diversity and Its Limits: Moving Beyond Tolerance and Accommodation'.

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The chapters in this book were given as originally lectures and so with this publication a more popular, less formal or academic style of presentation has been maintained. I am grateful to the people in Wellington who attended, engaged the issues with challenging questions and warmly responded to the lectures.



## Preface

### Lloyd Geering

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As I write this Preface to *Being Faithful in Diversity* by Gary Bouma of Monash University, Melbourne I observe the fact that in the twenty-seven years of the existence of the society in New Zealand where these lectures were first delivered, a society that has the task of the study of religion and society, so far as I can remember there has never been a sociologist. Now that, when you come to think of it, is pretty odd when we call ourselves The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Society and Religion. These chapters fill a gap. I wonder if one of the reasons why we have not had a sociologist is that it is a bit like St Augustine when he was talking about time. He said he knew exactly what time was until he started to think about it. Well we all of us think we know what society is until we start to think about it and then we are all at sea, which is one of the reasons why Margaret Thatcher probably said there is no such thing as society. Society is a very difficult concept in many respects.

Of course just as religion, if you are going to discuss it, depends a great deal on how you are going to define it, so too society is a very difficult thing to think about until you try to determine, what is it that makes a society? If 60,000 people gather at a park to see a football match are they a society? There is something that joins them together and they have a common interest in what happens at that game. Of course they are divided on the fact of which side they want to win the game. In these chapters, Gary, you have brought an insight that society may be seeking some kind of future harmony but in doing so it also raises a whole lot of issues which divide it. And what is more, society exists at a whole lot of different levels. Each of the readers of this volume of essays belongs to a variety of different societies and contexts. We are part of a particular human society but we are also part of one in our own particular interests.

Gary, you are particularly concerned with the role that religion might play in society. The question must be asked, 'does religion join a society

together or does it divide societies one from another?' It is interesting to observe that two of the great religious traditions, Christianity and Islam, both set out in the hope of producing a completely, total, harmonious human society. Mohammad called it the brotherhood of people. It was the brotherhood of human kind that he set out to produce. Christians of course took over from the Jews who were already making their converts. That they should go out making converts was odd, but nevertheless the Christians took it over hoping that in fact it would bring all people together into one harmonious society. Well, it is clear from history, we have not managed a harmonious society well and indeed today human society is more divided than it has ever been before in human history.

Gary, your chapters have raised so many questions, without all too many answers of course, but you have raised all sorts of questions that society faces us with today. To attempt in today's society to do our little bit to bring some kind of harmony, good will, compassion that will draw people together is in fact a very big demand. So we are grateful to you for the way in which you have shown so lucidly the complexity of the situation.

Lloyd Geering  
New Zealand

## Introduction

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Religious diversity is my interest and has been my professional commitment for about forty years. It is interesting to me that it has become a little bit more interesting toward the end than it was at the beginning, when people, like my PhD thesis advisor said ‘why bother Bouma, there is not going to be any religion by the end of the twentieth century.’ We know them to be wrong now. I was able to discuss this with my thesis advisor before he died and have a good chuckle about it.

Religious diversity is probably one of the most important changes affecting our lives in the twenty-first century. Yes, those changes began earlier, but the twenty-first century is going to be about the management of religious diversity, doing it well, or getting it terribly wrong. Religious diversity has increased and become a part of daily life, in a way that it probably never was before, or if it was, it was much more isolated than it is now. It has become the new normal in the lives of most people. This book examines religious diversity and how it is that we cope with religious diversity, both locally and globally. The first chapter, ‘The Rise And Consequences Of Religious Diversity’, focuses on some facts about religious diversity. The second chapter, ‘Responses to Diversity: Road Rage on the Highway to Heaven’ examines some of the hostile and negative reactions to religious diversity. Chapter three, ‘Responses to Diversity: Snapping along the Spandex: Diversity and Social Cohesion’, discusses ways that religious diversity stretches the social fabric this way and that and how social cohesion is possible under conditions of diversity. In the fourth chapter, ‘Being Faithful in Diversity: Beyond Relativism and Exclusivity’, we come to the fundamental issue of is it all just about relativism or are there some criteria that are emerging by which we can distinguish healthy from unhealthy religions. If religions are not all the same, and they are not, then are there limits, standards and criteria to which religions can be held accountable. Finally, in chapter five, ‘A Way Forward’, points to some

challenges. That is the journey that I hope to take you on in this book and you will join me, I hope, in having some fun in doing this thinking about the issues as we go along.

What is religion and spirituality? Well religions and spiritualities both relate to dimensions of human life that intersect with and point beyond the now, the ordinary and the material. Religion includes beliefs and practices about questions like: Is this all there is? Why get out of bed in the morning? What is it all about? And along with the answers and practices come communities and histories and identities, a sense of belonging, rights, celebrations that both connect the now with the more than, the other than. Some people make a huge difference between religion and spirituality. I say religion without spirituality is as dead as a doornail. And spirituality without religion, well, you can not do something more than three times without it becoming organised anyway, and so you are not going to have much spirituality that you can detect, that is not already well on its way to becoming a religion. This is a sensitising definition to help us detect religion even if it is not found in the containers we are accustomed to.

The focus of this book is on Australia and New Zealand with some reference to Canada. These former British colonies share much and yet are quite distinct in the ways they manage religious diversity. For a richer comparison of the ways nations manage religious diversity I recommend *Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands*.<sup>1</sup> The examples will be drawn largely from Australia and New Zealand. The ways these issues have emerged in Europe is so fundamentally different as to require a major work just to provide the background necessary to any comparison. The United States is different again. The facile transposition of issues and the application of responses from Europe or the USA are misguided at best and quite frankly dangerous. Thus the target audience is primarily Australians and New Zealanders, and particularly those of faith.

While much of what I say will be directed at a Christian audience as the lectures were presented in that context, the issues raised and the questions to be faced are the same for all religious groups. Diversity challenges everyone and every perspective and faith, each spirituality and religion. How to respond to diversity, how to be faithful to self, other, religion and spirituality are challenges to all thoughtful people. Given that I am a person of faith, a Christian, these issues confront me in ways I cannot dodge or dismiss but this fact also makes me sensitive to the issues faced by others of faith and for that matter those who believe there is nothing.

While you will learn more about me as the book unfolds, some preliminary information may be of help. I am a priest and sociologist and have been all my life. My father was a Professor of Sociology and preached occasionally. Theology was a sport played fiercely on Sunday afternoons—there was little else that was allowed—when gathered at my grandparents' home we would deconstruct at least three sermons, discuss current events and issues arising from church and society relationships. Religious diversity was seen by my father's side of the family as a disease to be overcome by active proselytising and mission work. However, religious diversity was built into my family, as my mother's family did not go to church. Moreover they were the loving, caring and affectionate ones.

### Some Further Reading

1. Gary Bouma, Rod Ling and Doug Pratt *Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia and the Pacific: National Case Studies* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

