AUSTRALIAN RELIGION STUDIES

REVIEW

Managing Religious Diversity

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Australian Religion Studies REVIEW

Special Edition

Managing Religious Diversity:
From Threat to Promise

edited by Gary D. Bouma

Book Reviews

Editor's Preface

Religious diversity and cultural plurality now characterise most Western and many other societies. The movement of people, ideas, beliefs, technologies and practices made possible by global mass transport and communication over the past two centuries and at a steeply increasing rate since World War II have transformed the religious profiles of most nations radically increasing the diversity of religions, spiritualities and world views available to ordinary citizens. The religious marketplace offers a vast panoply of churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, shrines, places of pilgrimage, forms of prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Until very recently religious diversity was viewed a danger -- likely to occasion violent conflict, a cultural disease -- something to be overcome or at least transcended, and something to be repressed, controlled. Modernity insisted on national cultural and religious uniformity. The best, always seen as singular and uniform, would prevail. Diversity was merely an interim testing step to the achievement of the best. Memories of, or more usually, myths of wars of religion were used to whip up fear of religious diversity and to legitimate its repression. The Twentieth Century has been the century of 'ethnic cleansing' and of ecumenism. Which will be the story of the next century, millennium?

There is evidence in these papers of a more hopeful future growing from an understanding of the present. In this not impossibly distant future religious and cultural diversity will be seen as a positive resource. The delights of multicultural societies reach well beyond those of cuisine and music. Inter-cultural sensitivity and inter-religious communication are becoming characteristics of ordinary Australians as the negotiation of their daily lives brings people from diverse religions and cultures into regular contact in schools, shopping centres and leisure centres. Dealing with these issues is no longer the domain of the elites of various groups, but is now the daily activity of ordinary people. In a world of global communication and increased inter-cultural negotiation these skills will be increasingly valuable to business, industry and government as well as to families and individuals in their daily lives.

The papers presented in this issue of the *Australian Religious Studies Review* address issues of religious diversity and its management. They have been loosely categorised into three groups. Each offers a perspective on religious diversity grounded in one of the disciplines represented by the diverse membership of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions. Thus there are papers taking sociological, theological, philosophical approaches as well as those reporting research dealing with religious diversity or dealing with ministry or education issues in the context of religious diversity.

While largely focussed on Australia, several papers provide comparative approaches and the detailed case study of Singapore provides an important window on the operation of a quite different society. A society which differs both from its

immediate neighbours but also from other former British Colonies such as Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand.

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