

**Fethullah Gülen Chair  
Inaugural International Conference, 2009**

**From Dialogue to Collaboration:  
The Vision of Fethullah Gülen and Muslim-Christian Relations**

**Sir James Gobbo  
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Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy**

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I am honoured to be formally opening this important, inaugural International Conference entitled, From Dialogue to Collaboration, The Vision of Fethullah Gülen and Muslim-Christian Relations

This title is itself encouraging for not so long ago that there was not a great deal of dialogue, let alone collaboration in Muslim-Christian relations. There was a long history of ecumenical dialogue in the Christian area but interfaith dialogue was another matter.

In Australia, we have, since the 1970s, had much debate on multiculturalism or, as later referred to, cultural diversity. Only in the 1990s did we begin to talk about religious diversity, even though culture and religion are closely intertwined in any culturally diverse society.

In July 1997, a major International Conference took place here in Melbourne. It was sponsored by the Australian Multicultural Foundation and W.C.R.P. and had a number of distinguished speakers, including the then Governor-General, Sir William Dean, Dr Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury, and H.E. Cardinal Arinze, the leading expert of the Catholic Church on relations with Islam. I was then Governor of Victoria and said in my speech:

*“Religions – and the churches or congregations or indigenous groups which are the living face of various faiths – have an enormous stake in a healthy multiculturalism and a healthy cultural diversity. A healthy multicultural society is built on true tolerance and respect for the rights and duties of others. If there is intolerance of cultural difference, there will be intolerance of religion. If people of faith cannot practice tolerance, then their faith will be impugned and will ultimately fail.”*

There followed a number of Conferences known as Abraham Conferences. The second of these took place in 2004 here at the Australian Catholic University. The theme of the Conference was “Our Future Together: Muslims, Christians and Jews,” reflecting ACU’s leadership (today shared with

Monash and the Inter Cultural Society). I gave the principal paper known as the Abraham Lecture, which covered three major topics:

- Immigration settlement
- Issue of violence and religion
- Contribution of different faiths to settlement

I will briefly refer to the second and third of these topics. The topic of violence and religion is a vast one. In this Lecture, I covered the very topical issue of suicide terrorism and set out in detail why suicide is forbidden by Islam, as is confirmed by all reputable Muslim scholars. At the same time, I provided the volume of evidence that official Islamic bodies, both in the UK and here in Australia, have denounced violence and terrorism, including use of suicide weapons.

I also replied to the frequent claim that historically, religion was closely tied to violence and was the cause of wars and the consequent misery. History does, of course, show some examples of wars fought over issues which included religion but this was by no means true of the most extensive wars in history. So, for example, the centuries of wars of expansion by Rome had nothing to do with religion and the same was true of the centuries of Barbarian invasions through the Dark Ages. Coming to more recent times, the two most costly wars in history, namely the First and Second World Wars, had nothing to do with religion.

Turning to the third topic of migrants' settlement, the contribution of religion to the success of our migration story was not difficult to illustrate. Two areas, namely welfare and education, spring to mind.

In migrants' welfare, there was a very significant part played by religious bodies in assisting migrants in the settlement process.

The largest non-English speaking group of migrants in Australia was made up of migrants from Italy, the largest concentration being here in Melbourne. The heaviest period of movement was between 1947 and 1967. Throughout that period the main burden of assistance, which was both personalised and sensitive, fell on the shoulders of religious such as chaplains and their supporting lay groups. During those 20 years, Co.As.It., the official Italian welfare agency and the largest migrant welfare agency in Australia, did not exist and the main burden of providing assistance to Italians in their own language fell on the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief and on individual chaplains. As I was

President of Co.As.It. for some twelve years in the 1980s and 1990s, I am happy to recognise the enormous contribution of the Catholic Church to the successful settlement of Italian migrants in the two decades before Co.As.It. was formed.

What I have said of Italian settlers also holds true in other communities. I refer today in particular to the early Jewish community, to the Greek community and to Muslim religious leaders in the Turkish and Lebanese communities.

Another example is the great contribution made by the Ecumenical Migration Centre. That Centre evolved out of the European Australian Christian Fellowship, itself a product of the World Council of Churches.

In the field of education, an indispensable contribution was made by various religious bodies. In the early history of this country the Scots through the Presbyterian Church, for example, set up their own schools to preserve their faith and their culture.

When a whole new wave of cultures came to Australia in the post-war period, there was an urgent need to respond to what these groups regarded as their highest priority, along with employment, namely a culturally sensitive education for their children. Culturally sensitive meant recognising the religion was part and parcel of their culture. As a result, the Catholic Church was obliged to provide schooling for tens of thousands of migrant children without, at that time, any financial assistance from the State, a situation which continued until State aid to denominational schools was provided in the 1970s.

In recent years, there has been considerable work, led by the Australian Multicultural Foundation, in surveys of the multiplicity and character of the many faiths which have found a welcoming home in Australia. In this context, I refer particularly to the work of Professor Des Cahill, Professor of Intercultural Studies at RMIT University, and Professor Gary Bouma, Unesco Chair at Monash University in Intercultural and Interreligious Relations.

All the while – and relatively unknown to us in Australia – there was growing the work and scholarship of Fethullah Gülen. This reached Australia recently – through the ACU – on the launch of the Fethullah Gülen Chair in November 2007. The launch of that Chair, with Dr Ismail Albayrak as the inaugural Chair, was a high water mark. May I pause here to take you back to that important

occasion when the nature of the Fethullah Gülen contribution was described. I cannot improve on Professor Greg Barton's speech on the occasion. Professor Barton, who is here today, described Gülen's thought as having three main characteristics and I quote him:

*"He is, first and foremost, an alim, a traditional Islamic scholar with a deep understanding of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic history. ... Gülen has inspired a vast social movement concerned with practical religious philanthropy on a grand scale.*

*The second element in Gülen's thought and in the Gülen movement's social activism is a love of learning."*

And thirdly, he said, it is marked by service. Professor Barton concluded:

*"This new century promises to see so much more achieved in Muslim-Christian relations and in the scholarly understanding of religion and religious communities than was achieved last century. The launch of this Chair at this university, I believe, represents something very good and something of great significance that goes well beyond any one institution and any one appointment. This, insyallah, God willing, is that start of something big."*

This inaugural International Conference is another high water mark. It is very timely.

There is evidence of pressure on Governments, including here in Victoria, to remove or reduce existing privileges and exemptions. Some of those sustaining this pressure argue in effect, that freedom of religion and belief essentially means freedom of worship – in the home or in a church or mosque – but not in the public arena, which is to be wholly secular. This is the philosophical rationale for a concerted drive to deprive religious organisations to carry their beliefs into the conduct of schools, hospitals, aged care facilities, hospices and welfare facilities.

This concerted effort to reduce and restrict religious freedom and belief coincides with – perhaps is allied with – an aggressive atheism, which mocks religion as superstitious, irrational and blind. Atheism here goes beyond a rational debate and often under the guise of secularism, attacks religion in all forms as in conflict with the proper functioning of a secular state. The terms of the debate should, at the very least, involve respect for those who profess a religion, as well as respect for those who profess no faith. Unfortunately, some of those putting the anti-religion view do not accord any respect to religion.

This is a critical time in public affairs and for those who cherish true freedom of religion and belief. In officially opening this inaugural International Conference, may I express the hope that the Conference will enrich understanding and promote collaboration including collaboration to ensure respect for all religions and for those with no religion.