

Religion in Australia: diversity makes us stronger



Federal Member for Berowra Julian Leeser and his wife Joanna with their newborn son, James Samuel John Leeser.

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I write this as I watch my firstborn sleep in his hospital crib. James Samuel John Leeser was born at the Sydney Adventist Hospital, whose staff are called to care in the Christian Adventist tradition and take their Sabbath seriously.

James bears the name of his grandfather and two of his great-grandfathers. We have given him the names of his forebears not just because, according to tradition, we honour our parents and grandparents but because we want him to know that his story does not start with him, or with us, but that he is a link in a chain to a family, a society and a set of values and traditions.

James is a seventh-generation Australian. He is inheriting a country from his parents, who inherited it from their parents, and so on across the generations.

I want James to understand the particular perspective that comes from being a Jewish Australian — a religious minority that has never numbered more than 1 per cent of the population — in a land that has been, almost uniquely in human history, good to the Jewish people.

Australia is founded on the Judeo-Christian tradition, the font of liberalism, which has the core notion that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and that therefore, whoever we are, all are deserving of equal dignity. The dignity of the human person forms the touchstone of liberalism's focus on the individual over the collective.

If all human beings are in the image and likeness of God, then all human beings should have freedom to worship God in their own way. This notion has underpinned Western theological thinking since the Westphalian settlement.

One of the things that makes me proud of Australia is that it has always been a religiously tolerant land where people can freely practise their faith. For people of faith, the idea that a tradition or a set of beliefs is ordained by God (or whatever supreme being they may believe in) makes that tradition or set of beliefs fundamental.

Therefore the right to practise your faith according to its traditions, customs and beliefs is fundamental to a believer's very existence. That is why true believers seek to leave countries where people are not able to exercise their religious beliefs freely or, worse still, are persecuted for doing so. Australia has never been that sort of a country.

Throughout history, Jews have been persecuted for their faith: murdered, forced to convert, forced to deny their beliefs or to renounce God. But in Australia, Jews have always been able to be that which they are called upon to be, a light unto the nations, to perform the mitzvot or good deeds according to the Law of Moses.

Jews have been a part of the Australian story since a dozen Jewish convicts came ashore with the First Fleet. No office has ever been barred to Jews in Australia. This is the country of Sir John Monash and Sir Isaac Isaacs. Today I am one of six Jewish members of the commonwealth parliament.

As an Australian, James will meet many people of different faiths and will have the opportunity to experience and gain an understanding of the customs and ceremonies of faith communities that are not his own.

The religious diversity of Australia means that Australians from every faith background have the chance to share their traditions with others. That was always the view in the home where I grew up.

My parents chose to send me to an Anglican school because they wanted me to be part of mainstream society and to understand Australia's dominant Christian tradition, theology, beliefs and culture. But they also instilled in me a sense that while we should respect Christianity, our faith was different. I understood this. On Friday night I was at home for Shabbat dinners. We attended synagogue on a Friday night and Saturday, not a Sunday.

Having my own faith tradition that was different from the other boys was not a negative, it was a positive. I understood their tradition and could tell them something of mine. Engaging with people of different faiths continued beyond my school days. Years later, before entering parliament, I spent the best four years of my working life at Australian Catholic University, where I spent time thinking not only about education policy but about the future of the church in Australia and its place in our national life.

Today, as a parliamentarian I regularly attend church services as well as services at gurudwaras, mosques and Hindu, Buddhist and Baha'i temples.

My best friend, Shahan Ahmed, is a Muslim. He and I were at high school and law school together. Our friendship is born of shared experience. Shahan has shared Passover with us and we have shared Eid with him. I have learned something of Islam from him and he has learned something of Judaism from me.

These are the bonds that make Australia stronger. It says something good about Australia that a Jewish boy can be educated by Anglicans, work for the largest mission of the Catholic Church and have a best friend who is a Muslim.

That is not to say Australians of faith have always got along. Until the early 1970s there was a sectarian divide between Protestants and Catholics. It says something about Robert Menzies that although he was a proud Presbyterian Scot, he actively rejected sectarianism.

Today, while more than two-thirds of Australians claim adherence to one or faith or the other, the level of religious literacy in Australia is declining. The public conversation about religion is not assisted by simplifications of religious doctrines and the assumption by some in the media that religious leaders are pedophiles or terrorists.

It is rare that religion is lauded for its works of education, healthcare or social welfare. It is even rarer that religion is lauded for providing people a sense of meaning, community and an inspiration to do good work, based on teachings that restrain the selfish instincts of human beings. But despite attempts by some opinion leaders to marginalise the place of religion in the public sphere, religion survives as a force that changes people's lives for the better, calling them to love God and serve their fellow citizens.

It does so because, as British rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us, religion "answers three questions that every reflective person must ask. Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?"

Religion calls people to serve others, providing a sense of identity and purpose to life that is larger and more enduring than fulfilling the needs of the material self.

The search for meaning in people's lives has never been stronger.

We see it in the rise of youth suicides and of secular substitutes for faith communities, in the disaffection of young people and in segments of society attracted to a nihilistic brand of radical Islam.

In this context strong, welcoming, confident faith communities have an important voice that needs to be heard more in the public square.

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<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/religion-in-australia-diversity-makes-us-stronger/news-story/48d1c32e9b13fbd4a7773920f1ed58b3>