**THE INTERFAITH CENTRE OF MELBOURNE**

**2018 World Interfaith Harmony Week**

**REPORT**

**Event: *Who and Where Are We in a Changing World?***

**Faith Leaders speak on Creation Stories and the Meaning of Life in Our Universe.**

Saturday 24th February, 1.30 pm - 5.00 pm, Deakin Edge, Federation Square.

Corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets, Melbourne, Australia.

**World Interfaith Harmony Week**

In 2010, HM King Abdullah II addressed the 65th UN General Assembly and proposed the idea for a ‘World Interfaith Harmony Week’ to further broaden his goals of faith-driven world harmony by extending his call beyond the Muslim and Christian community to include people of all beliefs, those with no set religious beliefs as well. A few weeks later, HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad presented the proposal to the UN General Assembly, where it was adopted unanimously as a UN Observance Event.

The World Interfaith Harmony Week, like all the previous endeavors of HM King Abdullah, is not a call to water down one’s faith, but rather it’s a call to respect our differences and personal beliefs and to unite around the basic principles that people of all beliefs agree upon and to understand that harmony can only come if we build upon a solid foundation of dialogue that has **“Love of God and love of the neighbor or, love of Good and love of the neighbor”** as its core principle for engagement.

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**Background to the Event**

**Why choose a theme of religious and spiritual understandings of creation, of how the universe came to be, of who we are, and where we are, for this year's World Interfaith Harmony Week?**

The State of Victoria is known as the most successful multicultural State in Australia, however over the past year we have experienced attacks on civilians (eg. Bourke Street incident, Flinders Street incident), rising Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and racism.

Refugees and the homeless in our State need more help.

The South Sudanese community has been stigmatised and stereotyped as the wider community has been fed a negative stereotype by politicians, about dysfunctionality, violence, and criminal activity attributed to some young Africans.

The First Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples, have a unique relationship with the land and water and their rights and obligations as custodians should be respected. Community awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal history and culture needs to be increased to ensure that a Treaty and Constitutional recognition can be achieved. There are issues regarding Aboriginal health, Closing the Gap, and how we involve ourselves in Reconciliation.

In addition, the daily news programs show us violence, disease and disasters that are currently occurring around the world. We can feel overwhelmed when we are faced with so much negativity and perceived lack of concern for the 'other'.

Environmental issues concern many Australians and there are growing protests about a huge coal mining project that will create billions of tonnes of pollution and irreversibly damage the World Heritage Great Barrier Reef area if the mine goes ahead - but the other side of the debate is that the mine will create jobs!

These issues raise questions about the meaning of life, about Love of God and love of the neighbour or love of the Good and love of the neighbour.

When we look up to the stars the mind readily turns to think about the meaning of life and the origin of existence. Virtually all religions have Origin Stories that, while differing importantly from each other, agree that the existence of the universe as a whole and of our individual lives is due to a creative divine will, rather than a lucky accident.

Prof. Brian Cox started a recent series on ABC TV by saying he would explain the meaning of life in the universe in scientific terms, but he ended by saying that science can't tell us the meaning of our lives, we must work it out for ourselves.

**The Event**

Turning our focus from the Universe to our local multicultural communities and the problems we face, seven faith leaders were invited to speak about Creation Stories from their traditions, drawing from the literal, moral, symbolic and spiritual levels of understanding and were asked to put forward practical ways in which we can experience more meaning in our lives and 'Love of the Neighbour'.

The faith leaders were invited to bring community members with them to meet their 'neighbours' who come from diverse faiths, philosophies and cultures.

February brings the long summer holidays to a close in Melbourne as schools reopen and people return to work - always a challenge in the southern hemisphere for organising an interfaith event. Religious leaders may also take a break over the Summer.

Newsletters were sent out with information about the upcoming free event with details of how to register. An advertisement was placed in Spectrum, a pullout section of The Saturday Age newspaper, which covers key upcoming cultural and arts events. The publicity opened our invitation to the wider community as well as spreading the word about the World Interfaith Harmony Week to readers who may not be aware of its existence.

A copy of the advertisement is with this Report.

The event was opened in the traditional indigenous way by Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy, AO, who gave the Welcome to Country. (Please see the video for all ten segments of this event)

The scientific story of the Universe opened the seven creation stories.

It was encapsulated in a two-minute video showing Edgar Mitchell, the Sixth astronaut to walk on the Moon, who spoke of his spiritual experience in outer space as he journeyed home to planet Earth and which led him to research consciousness. “The presence of divinity became almost palpable, and I knew that life in the universe was not just an accident based on random processes. . ."

Seven religious and spiritual leaders were invited to speak to the topic for twenty minutes from their traditions.

* Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy, AO, the Wurundjeri Senior Leader, spoke about the Indigenous creation story of the Kulin Nation, a story over 60,000 years old, which has informed Aboriginal people of our region about caring for the earth and each other.
* Swami Sunishthananda spoke from the Hindu Vedantic tradition
* Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe, spoke from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.
* Imam Fadil Fachni, spoke from the Islamic tradition
* Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black spoke from the Progressive Jewish tradition
* Fr. Daniel Gai, spoke from the Anglican Christian tradition and as a member of the South Sudanese community.
* Jasbir Singh Suropada spoke from the Sikh tradition.

Each speaker shared their creation stories from sacred texts or their oral tradition in their individual ways, sharing many commonalities and acknowledging the differences with respect. They wove together strands of religious teachings about creation, the meaning of life, and gave practical ways of how we can care for each other and the earth.

Dr Nicholas Coleman, Moderator, gave a summary at the end of the event which can be viewed in *Reflections on Harmony* in segment Ten of the video.

Over one hundred people, including audience of eighty, plus special guests and volunteers, attended the event. Positive feedback was given about the wisdom they gained from the speakers and of how the speakers, in their individual ways, agreed on so many commonalities and showed respect for each others' differences.

We all learned more, even the speakers.

The event was video taped and edited, ten segments in all, with segments of each speaker attached to a newsletter and sent to over 700 email addresses. In addition, the segments were put up on our website and YouTube for people who could not attend the event on the day, to watch at leisure. Link to our website page:

http://interfaithcentre.org.au/who-and-where-are-we-in-a-changing-world/

Link to YouTube will take people to the ten segments:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6cU9kr-sh-reTEHiBCWIbg

Dr Nicholas Coleman, Deputy-Director of The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, was the Moderator. Cath Connelly, Celtic Harpist, provided beautiful music at appropriate intervals. Rev Helen Summers, Founder and Director of The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, produced the event.