The Contribution of Religion to Social Capital in the Context of a Global Neighbourhood: Possibilities and Challenges

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This essay begins by looking at the nature of social capital and the ways that religion contributes to and undermines social capital. The paper draws on data from a survey on religion and community undertaken in Australia by Edith Cowan University and NCLS Research in 1997 and 1998[1] showing that religious belief and practice relate to the affirmation of the values of altruism and helpfulness and to participation in voluntary activities for the sake of the well-being of individuals and the wider community. However, the survey suggests that religion does not contribute to trust, and can, in certain circumstances, contribute to distrust. Nor does it contribute to confidence in organisations and expert systems. Similarly, in terms of the global arena, it is evident that religions continue to contribute to distrust. Yet, there are signs that religions can rise above their differences, pointing to universal ethical principles and dimensions of spirituality that transcend particular religious expressions. Religious organisations can also contribute to social capital by cooperating with each other as they seek the common good.

The Nature of Social Capital

The term 'social capital' has been variously defined (Winter, 2000: 29). Essentially, it includes 'the social networks and various types of formal and informal associations that exist between people, and on which people can draw when seeking information, cooperation to achieve common ends, or seeking support or assistance of some kind' (Black and Hughes, 2001: 35-36). In assessing social capital it is necessary to pay attention not only to the existence of networks and associations, but to the qualities which facilitate the sharing of information, the achievement of common ends and the giving and receiving of support and assistance.

Michael Woolcock, an Australian sociologist working with the World Bank, and his co-worker, Deepa Narayan, (2000) identify three types of networks and associations that constitute social capital. The first type is often referred to as 'bonding relationships' such as those that occur among close friends and within many families: relationships in which people can find practical and every-day

support. Bonding relationships are referred to as 'thick ties', that is, ties between people which operate in a variety of aspects of life, rather than limited to a particular common interest or situation.

The second type are 'bridging relationships'. These are less intimate, more often at the level of acquaintance than close friend. People cannot always rely on them for personal support. However, they function as contacts through which information can be found, particular tasks undertaken, and contracts developed. They are sometimes referred to as 'thin ties'. It is the sort of tie that exists between people who work well together on a committee, but have little, if anything, to do with each other outside that context. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) do not see bridging and bonding relationships as competing. Rather, social capital is enhanced by a mixture of both types of relationships. While bonding relationships provide every-day support, bridging relationships open the individual to a greater range of resources in achieving personal objectives and common ends.

'Linkages', relationships between individuals and organizations, constitute a third type of association contributing to social capital. Much of contemporary life takes place within the context of organisations and expert systems (Giddens, 1990). The achievement of personal and communal goals involves drawing on 'links' with educational, health, retailing, government and many other organisations and systems. Only as people have relationships and know how to make connections with such organisations and systems can they access their resources.

It should be noted that other authors have used the words 'bonding' and 'bridging' in different ways. Robert Putnam, who has probably contributed more to the popularisation of the term 'social capital' than anyone else, refers to bonding relationships as exclusive and tending to reinforce homogeneity in groups. He defines bridging relationships as inclusive, crossing social boundaries (2000: 22-23).

Putnam's distinction is not helpful for two reasons. Firstly, it fails to capture the fact that exclusivity can occur in all sorts of relationships, and while it may strengthen a sense of belonging within groups, it may be detrimental to other social relationships. Secondly, Putnam's distinction ignores the importance of the distinction between the thick ties of those relationships which offer day-by-day personal support and those thin ties with a wider range of acquaintances. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) note, for example, that many slum dwellers often have strong bonding relationships, but lack bridging relationships that will help them to move out of the circumstances they find themselves in. On the other hand, in the Western world, many middle class people often have a wide range of bridges, but lack the bonding relationships to help them cope with personal crises.

Eva Cox and Peter Caldwell (2000) argue that the essence of social capital is to be found in the inclusivity of relationships, particularly with strangers. Social capital is not primarily a matter of how people get on with their friends, neighbours and acquaintances. It has more to do with the generalised trust that is seen in the ways the person approaches the stranger, the unknown person: whether people are open or closed to others, wary or trusting.

Yet, in practice, the sense of having norms and values, language and worldview, in common with others, contributes substantially to social capital. People who feel they see the world in a similar way are more likely to trust each other and act together.

'Social capital' can become a normative rather than descriptive term when it is conceived as a social good, necessarily involving inclusivity. Alternatively, it can be defined in a non-normative way, recognising that the same social relationships may have both inclusive and exclusive dimensions. The identification of the 'dark' and the 'light' consequences of particular social networks and associations then becomes a task distinct from that of identifying where social capital exists.

Nevertheless, social capital is not just the fact of the relationships but also its qualities. Much of the theoretical discussion of social capital has revolved around the theme of trust which is seen as necessary for bonding, bridging and linking relationships. Trust is the quality of a relationship which involves the assumption of the honesty of the other person, and belief that the other person will respect one's own interests and will act according to one's expectations.

Other qualities are also important. Research based on the Australian Community Survey has shown that one of the factors correlating most highly with trust was altruism: the belief that the interests of others should be put before one's own rights (Hughes, Bellamy and Black, 2000: 232). Others, such as Mark Latham, prefer to talk about reciprocity: the idea that, in the long term, doing good to others will bring its rewards (Latham, 2000: 195). Whether one is motivated by the belief that one will be personally rewarded for being helpful to others, or whether one feels that helpfulness is right irrespective of its consequences, the desire to help others certainly contributes to social relationships of all kinds.

Beyond the concern for the interests of others and the well-being of the community is the willingness to take action to achieve for those ends. In the literature on social capital, mention is often made of 'proactivity', people's willingness to act to meet challenges and right wrongs (Black and Hughes, 2001: 99-100; Onyx and Bullen, 1997: 6). One demonstration of proactivity is people's engagement in voluntary activities for the good of the community.

Social capital is often strengthened when a community is striving to achieve a common goal. Crises, such as a bushfire, may bring people together. At times social capital is created because people are aware of social problems or issues. Social divisions and the lack of trust can, in themselves, spur people to work creatively to build a better society. Putnam has noted that wars often contribute to social capital as people cooperate to defeat a common enemy. Wars, for example, have led to big increases in voluntary endeavours (2000: 268).

The irony of September 11th 2001 is that the hatred and terror of the attack created social capital. People in New York helped each other as they struggled to escape. Together they applauded the rescue workers. Together they stood silently in remembrance of those who had died. Strangers looked each other in the eye and knew they were sharing the same pain.

Putnam (2002) has argued that a higher level of social capital, measured in a variety of ways, has emerged from September 11th 2001. He reported a few months later that 44 per cent of Americans has higher levels of trust in the national government. Eleven per cent of Americans said they had increased levels of trust in people of other races. Their behaviour demonstrated an increased concern for the well-being of others: 7 per cent more Americans donated blood in the months following the attack.

Contribution of Religion to Social Capital

Traumatic events bring strangers together. They provide a common experience and lead to the identification of common objectives. September 11th 2001 itself created a common conception of evil in the notion of terrorism, and the common desire to overcome terrorism. In these ways, traumatic events actually contributed to the building of social capital.

Religions perform similar functions: creating common conceptions and objectives. Through the centuries, religious systems of thought have provided whole cultures with common sets of norms and ideals. They have identified 'evil' in common ways and provided common sets of aspirations. They have provided means of dealing with evil and encouraging good.

Religions have bound groups of people together by providing common views of the world and common sets of values. More than that, they have created communities of people who shared those common ideals, and partly because of that, have trusted each other and have found ways of working together.

Religions have provided languages about good and evil, of ideals and ways of achieving them, of failures and ways of overcoming them. The languages of salvation, dharma, puja, or the hadith have, in themselves, provided frameworks in which people have lived their lives, identified their aspirations, and named the paths to those aspirations. These 'fellowships' have transcended linguistic, ethnic and cultural boundaries.

I have personally experienced that when, as a Christian minister, I have been welcomed and invited to speak in contexts very different from my own: in a Baptist Church in Moscow, and New Guinea hill-tops near Mount Hagan, in a Karen village of the border of Burma and many villages in Thailand. The sense that I shared their religious faith enabled barriers of ethnic background and culture to be transcended.

Apart from providing a shared framework of ideals and a common sense of identity, most religions gather people together in face-to-face communities. Within these groups, not only are common goals and values identified, but people are engaged and motivated to help in specific activities or projects. Social bonds, bridges and linkages may be formed through those communities.

Thus religions have contributed to social capital by providing opportunities for the development of relationships and by reinforcing the values which contribute to personal relationships. By bringing people together and providing a context of common norms in which trust could be developed, religions have been

important in the formation of social capital. Something of this role is demonstrated in recent empirical research.

Religion and Some Norms

The Australian Community Survey was conducted by Edith Cowan University and NCLS Research in 1997 and 1998. A random sample of 8500 Australian adults completed a written survey on questions about the nature of community life and religion. The Australian Community Survey did not provide a systematic or comprehensive attempt to measure social capital, but did provide some indicators of contributing factors such as people's trust in others and their confidence in organisations. A range of questions about religion were included in the survey. Noting that only 1 per cent of the sample identified with Buddhism, for which one of the following indicators would be inappropriate as indicative of a religious perspective, the following analysis uses two questions: whether people believed in a personal God and how frequently they attended religious services.

The Australian Community Survey found that there is a widespread opinion that religion in general, and the churches in particular, provide the basis for common values. When asked about the importance of religion, 48% of Australian adults said religion was important to them primarily because it encouraged them to be caring and considerate of others;

- 28% said religion was not important to them at all;
- 12% said religion was important in terms of spending time with God in worship;
- 7% said religion was important because it was about keeping the Ten Commandments; and
- 5% said religion was important because it was about talking about faith to other people.

Thus, religion was reported as important primarily because of its impact on values, particularly those most basic principles of being caring and considerate of others.

Asked about the functions of churches in community life, the function most strongly affirmed as important for churches was 'encouraging good morals'. Ninety-three per cent of the sample of Australian adults identified this as an important function of churches and 47% of Australians saw it as the MOST important function. This compares with 40% of the sample who saw the churches' primary function as providing opportunities for worship.

Furthermore, the encouragement of moral values was the area in which people felt the churches had contributed most. Thirty-six per cent of the sample reported that the churches had contributed quite a lot in this way in their local area and an additional 29 per cent affirmed that churches had contributed a great deal. Churches were also seen as having contributed through their wide network of schools and through their charity, but these functions were not so strongly affirmed as the contribution of churches to the moral fibre of communities.

Some confirmation that religion does have an impact on people's values was

found in the Australian Community Survey. People who believed in a personal God, for example, affirmed more strongly both the values of altruism and helpfulness:

- 31 per cent of those who believed in a personal God compared with 15 per cent of others affirmed strongly that one should put the responsibility to others before one's own rights, and
- 40 per cent of those who believed in a personal God compared with 29 per cent of others said that 'helpfulness' was a most important guiding principle in life.

The Survey also found significant positive relationships between attendance at religious services and affirmation of the values of altruism and helpfulness as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Per Cent of Australians Affirming Values of Altruism and Helpfulness by Attendance at Religious Services	**Never Attend %**	**Occasionally Attend %**	**Attend Monthly or More %**	**Significance**
Altruism: Affirming 'It is more important to put responsibilities towards others before your own rights'	29.0	32.4	43.0	.000
Helpfulness: 'Helpful (working for the welfare of others)' Per Cent Affirming Very Important or Most Important	64.0	69.0	76.0	.000
Involvement in some form of voluntary work for the benefit of others or the wider community	62.8	72.4	78.5	.000

It is interesting to note that those people who said their friends frequently attended religious services had significantly higher levels of confidence in those friends that they would help them, for example, in times of financial need. Thus the expectation that people who practise their religion will help their friends is extended to expectations of practical assistance.

There is a relation between religious belief and practice and people contributing in practical ways to the welfare of others within the community through voluntary service. In the Australian Community Survey, 72 per cent of those who said they believed in a personal God reported involvement in one kind of voluntary involvement or another, compared with 67 per cent of those respondents who did not share those beliefs. As shown in Table 1,

stronger relationships were found in relation to involvement in religious organisations, perhaps because they not only motivate people but have the opportunity to engage people in voluntary activities. Levels of involvement, even in non-church related welfare organisations, were significantly higher among those who attended religious services than those who never did so (Hughes and Black, 2002).

Hence, within the contemporary Australian context, religion contributes to social capital, both by affirming the values on which personal relationships are based, particularly bonding relationships, and by encouraging and engaging people in voluntary activities for the wellbeing of the others and the wider community.

Religion and Trust

While religion has long had the reputation of contributing to 'in-group' relationships, it has also had a reputation for being divisive and creating sub-groups within communities with opposing identities. For example, in Australia's white history, opposition between Catholics and Protestants has been widespread. In that context, religion has contributed to suspicion and to the failure to cooperate.

Much of the Catholic and Protestant antagonism in Australia has now evaporated. While loyalty to their denomination is more important to Catholics than any other major religious group apart from the Orthodox, only 24% of Catholics and 16% of Australian adults overall, think it is important to remain loyal to one religious denomination throughout their adult lives.

Nevertheless, religion does not appear to contribute to generalised trust in the ways it contributes to altruism and helpfulness. The Australian Community Survey measured trust through responses to four statements:

1. Generally speaking, most people in my local area can be trusted.
2. Generally speaking, most Australians can be trusted.
3. Generally speaking, you can't be too careful in dealing with most people in my local area.
4. Generally speaking, you can't be too careful in dealing with most Australians.

The Australian Community Survey found that 57 per cent of those who believed in a personal God and 59 per cent of those who did not share such beliefs said they could trust most other Australians. The differences were not statistically significant. Neither were they significant in relation to trust in local people.

Similarly, responses to those statements about trust did not differ significantly by frequency of attendance at religious services, as shown in

Table 2. In the relationships with the various measures of trust, the differences between those who attended religious services and those who did not were not statistically significant.

Table 2. Responses to Statements about Trust by Attendance at Religious Services	**Never Attend %**	**Occasionally Attend %**	**Attend Monthly or More %**
People in my local area can be trusted (Per cent affirming)	57.8	55.8	58.1
Most Australians can be trusted (Per cent affirming)	58.8	54.9	55.6
Can't be too careful with most people in local area (Per cent disagreeing)	47.2	48.0	51.0
Can't be too careful with most Australians (Per cent disagreeing)	55.5	56.3	57.4

Further analysis, however, suggests that religion may contribute both to trust and to distrust, and does so in ways that cancel each other out in the large sweep of analysis. While some religious people evidently feel they can trust others, some feel they cannot. It was found that frequent attenders at religious services who had low levels of trust in others were a little more likely to take a literalistic view of the Bible rather than believe it to be written by people inspired by God but containing some human errors. They were less likely to hold a relativistic view that all religions and philosophies may be right in their own way. They were more likely to identify with the Pentecostal or Baptist denominations than with the Anglican or Uniting Church. These results suggest that 'churches', would contribute more to social capital than 'sects', to use the traditional distinction of Ernst Troeltsch. In other words, those religious groups which seem themselves in opposition to 'the world' are less likely to be trusting than those which see themselves more as fulfilling ideals and values present in the world.

Those groups which draw strong distinctions between those who 'saved' and those who are not, are less likely to trust other people. While people within such groups find a strong sense of community within the group, they are more wary of people outside of the group. The Australian Community Survey found that among those who thought that conversion was the most important function of the church, 20 per cent believed that one could not trust most Australians, compared with 12 per cent of those who said conversion was of little or no importance.

While these results point in the direction of greater wariness and less trust of others among those with 'sect-like' religious attitudes, the results

were not strong. It remains true that more than half of all people who attend Baptist and Pentecostal churches, who hold a literalistic view of the Bible, and who hold that conversion is the most important function of the church, feel that one *can* trust most other Australians. Religion is not a primary factor in *lack* of trust in contemporary Australia, even if it contributes little to generalised trust.

The Australian Community Survey showed that other factors were much more important in the lack of trust than religious beliefs. People with poor self-esteem and with high levels of neuroticism in their personalities were less likely to trust others than people with high levels of self-esteem and low levels of neuroticism. Such characteristics of the personality have much more to do with genetic factors and with early childhood experiences than with religious traditions.

Religion and Trust in Organisations and Systems

In communities in which people know each other, trust is built in the context of familiarity and personal reputation. One knows whether one can trust another person or not, because one has had direct experience of the other person, or one knows their reputation, based on the experiences of other acquaintances.

Anthony Giddens (1990), the British sociologist and social commentator, has argued that much of contemporary urban life revolves around expert systems, giant complex systems in which vast arrays of experts all have their place. If we do not know the individuals involved, we have to trust the system. We assume that each person knows their job and will do it properly. The system must be built and regulated in such a way to ensure that the people within it play their part responsibly. There must also be means of dealing with failures and providing means of redress when the system does not operate appropriately.

The parent may not know the teacher in the local school, but trust is based on the assumption that the system is working well that trains and employs the teacher and ensures that he or she has the appropriate credentials for the job. It is assumed that there are means of redress if the teacher does not do the job appropriately. The teacher is trusted, at least partially, because the education system is trusted, although there may come a time when personal familiarity and reputation also play a part in that trust.

The importance of trust in organisations and systems, not just individuals, is an important factor when considering the global neighbourhood. Trust is built through creating systems that are transparent and accountable and in which there are numerous checks and balances. People trust organisations and businesses when they know that their operations are publicly visible, even if they themselves do not have time to examine them. Levels of trust are increased by the fact that there are appropriate government regulations in place to ensure organisations and businesses are accountable

and to check their compliance. Trust is increased by consumer organisations which examine the operations of companies and measure the reliability of their products. As business, politics and religious organisations operate in a global neighbourhood, so these systems need to be global in scope.

The Australian Community Survey found that those who indicated belief in a personal God had higher levels of confidence in the churches at the .01 significance level, and in the police and state government at the .05 significance level. Otherwise, their levels of confidence did not vary significantly from those who had no belief in a personal God. Similar results were found in the relationship between confidence in organisations and attendance at religious services, as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Affirmation of Quite a Lot or A Great Deal of Confidence in Various Organisations and Systems by Involvement in Religious Services	**Never Attend %**	**Occasionally Attend %**	**Attend Monthly or More %**	**Significance**
Banks	18.8	22.0	21.7	.214
Churches	16.0	47.1	81.1	.000
Education system	48.3	54.0	51.0	.267
Government	64.0	72.8	73.9	.000
Health system	56.7	55.5	52.3	.274
Legal system	25.8	28.4	34.3	.010
Media	10.7	15.9	10.2	.019
Major companies	24.4	29.2	23.2	.051
Police	65.4	71.8	72.9	.001
Public Service	24.7	27.5	30.1	.402

Attenders of religious services had higher levels of confidence than those who do not attend in the symbols of authority in modern social life: in the government, legal system and police. However, they had no greater confidence in major companies, banks, the health system, the education system, the media or the public service.

As confidence in organisations and systems becomes more important in the formation of social capital in modern societies, so the role of religion in the formation of social capital diminishes. While religion is important at the personal level, encouraging values that underlie personal relationships and voluntary involvement in the community, religion is largely irrelevant in the linkage and generalised trust dimensions.

Levels of education are more predictive of confidence in companies, banks, the health system, the education system and the public service. People who feel they know how society works are more confident that they will not be deceived by the systems.

Challenges for Religion in Contributing to Social Capital in the Context of the Global Neighbourhood

As has been noted, religion has contributed to social capital by providing common sets of norms and ideals, common ontologies and ethics. However, in that very process, religion has established boundaries and divided people. It has distinguished between those who accept its view of reality and its particular set of values and conceptions of good and evil, and those who do not. In the global environment, religious differences have been and still are commonly used as justifications for war both between nations and within nations. Religion continues to unite large groups of people, and establish boundaries which exclude others.

In many cases, the stronger the religious identity, the stronger the internal bonds and bridges. Yet, that very strength creates boundaries between those who are included and those who are not. Religion appears to be hindering the development of trust in the global arena rather than enhancing it.

The dream of Sir Julian Huxley and others that religion would be superceded by a global humanistic ethic seems less likely to be attained than when he developed his ideas in the middle of the twentieth century. Religious perspectives on reality and values are not likely to disappear, at least in the near future. In many parts of the world, there appears to be a strengthening of religious identity and fervour. This trend often coincides if not contributes to growing tensions between different groups of people and a decline in the extent and quality of those relationships which constitute social capital.

On the other hand, as noted above, religion appears to be having comparatively little impact at the level of economics, in the areas of trust in the large corporations and expert systems which dominate so much of the daily operation of global society. Many people believe that if religion operates at all, it should function only at a local and personal level. Many see religion as a personal preference or hobby, like collecting stamps. It may contribute to some local bonding and bridging among people with similar preferences, but does little more than that. If it can be excluded from national and global arenas, it will not contribute to social capital at that level, but neither will it be divisive.

Possibilities for a Religious Contribution at a Global Level

There is no doubt that religions will continue to gather people in small, local communities around the world. As they do that, religions will provide the opportunity for the development of bonding relationships. Further, by providing a common set of values and ideals, and a common sense of identity, it will continue to contribute to bridging relationships among those who share a similar faith.

But if religion continues to be a force in the lives of people, is there a possibility of religious faith contributing positively to social capital in the global neighbourhood? Can religion actually be effective in developing those cross-cutting ties between communities that Deepa Narayan (1999) has so forceful pointed out are essential in the broader vision of social capital?

There are several signs that indicate that, at times, religion can and does play a significant role in transcending the differences between people even across the boundaries of faith and creed, pointing to a commonality in human life and a set of common values and objectives. Three such signs are briefly discussed below.

1. The weakening of the barriers between religious traditions through the commodification of religion. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978) suggested that the living faith of men and women might be distinguished from the various traditions of faith from which they draw. People might see themselves first as human beings and people of faith, and secondly as drawing on certain traditions and heritages in the nurture of their personal faith. His hope was that such a development in the thinking of people might assist in overcoming the problems created by the tensions between the various religious communities.

There appears to be a movement in that direction. Spirituality is seen, particularly by younger people, as something personal, even idiosyncratic, and distinct from religious traditions and organizations (Marler and Hadaway, 2002: 293). The Australian Community Survey found that two-thirds of younger people affirmed the importance of having a spiritual life, but only one third said that religion was important to describing who they were.

The Australian Community Survey also found that a significant minority of Australians were drawing on religious resources from very different religions within the same time period. They were approaching religion from a consumerist perspective, using whatever religious resources they found useful for as long as they were useful. Many people do not regard religion primarily as a community into which they were born or to which they might make a long-term commitment, but as sets of traditions from which they can draw as is beneficial to their personal lives. Religion is being separated from ethnic cultures and from national identities. José Casanova notes this trend in his book *Public Religions in the Modern World.* He suggests that as religion becomes a voluntary involvement of individuals, it does not necessarily mean that religion recedes to the private and personal domain of individual lives. Rather, it means that religion, in as far as it enters the public domain, does so at the level of civil society, rather than through the patterns of established religion. People join action groups or pressure groups to achieve particular ends rather than use religion as a basis for upholding ethnic or national divisions (1994: 218-9).

As religion becomes a set of resources from which individuals choose, so the boundaries are weakened between the various religions. The fact that

people draw on a particular religious tradition does not create the same boundaries between groups of people as when people find their whole identity in one tradition.

While such attitudes to religion may decrease tensions between religious groups within the global neighbourhood, there are problems arising with the variety and complexity of the offerings. As Anthony Giddens (1994) has pointed out in his book, *Beyond Left and Right,* one of the consequences of the realisation that individuals must make their own faith decisions, is that some decide to opt for 'total and enclosed packages', for what he would describe as fundamentalist options. The insecurity that arises from choice makes all-encompassing options more attractive. Giddens suggests that this sense of individual choice is actually a factor in the growth of fundamentalist forms of religion in which there is a total and unreserved commitment to a particular religious option.

2. The recognition of religious universals. Another sign of hope has been those people who have appeared on the world stage as religious people, pointing to values and attitudes which transcend any particular religion or culture. People like Mahatma Ghandi and the Dalai Lama have inspired people the world over. Their 'religiousness' crosses the boundaries of particular religions.

James Fowler (1981) posits, as the final stage of religious development, the universalism of faith. As people move beyond the concrete acceptance of religious symbols, and even their more abstract formulations, they may finally appreciate the universal symbolic meanings which transcend particular historical religions.

Fowler has posited his stages within a psychological framework. He believes that only some people are capable, or have the experiences that lead them into an appreciation of the universal symbolic meanings which transcend all particular religions. However, it is possible that the recognition of the global neighbourhood may enhance those very conditions. People around the world are aware of the plurality of religion in a way never previously imagined. Many are keen to understand one another and find commonalities.

At various times during history, there have arisen new religious movements that have sought to bridge the gaps between existing religions, to find the commonalities between them and to move religious faith beyond the particularities. The Baha'i movement is an example of this from the 19th century, founded with the aim of world peace and harmony.

A recent essay has suggested that the concept of Gaia seeks to do this in a new way (Midgley, 2001). The underlying philosophy of Gaia has to do with the holistic nature of the environmental and social order in which we live. It points to the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of the whole natural world. While the concept has arisen in the world of science, it has been developed as a religious notion, from which may be derived a new ethic

of 'duty towards the whole' as distinct from an ethic of contract with other individuals (Midgley, 2001: 42).

While such movements point towards the possibility of religious beliefs that transcend particular cultures, Baha'i and Gaia become alternatives in the great global range of options. They give a vision to a few, but most people continue to operate at what Fowler described as the stages of concrete operations. Few can see past the concrete statements of faith to their symbolic and universal meanings.

3. Religions working through dialogue and cooperation for global causes. In his book, *Gods in a Global Village,* Lester Kurtz (1995) argues that those who are leaders in the religious traditions could take the initiative in working for peace within the global neighbourhood. He suggests that although the ontologies are different, there are some basic, common universal ethics. As religions point towards those, so religion can contribute to the sense that there are common ethics, even in the midst of our different histories and identities.

However, identifying the commonalities in ethics may not be as easy as Kurtz imagines. The universal ethical principles are not always easy to discern, nor easily dis-embedded from the ontologies and mythologies in which they are grounded. Take, for example, the value of charity. One of the prime models of charity for Theravada Buddhists is found in the story in the Vessantara in which the Buddha-to-be gives away his children. The essence of charity is found in the fact that one no longer clings to anything, even to one's own children. Charity, as are many other Buddhist values, intertwined with the Buddhist concept of anatta. The prime model of Christian charity rooted in the crucifixion and involves, in the minds of many people, a concept of martyrdom often translated in self-giving service for others. Both concepts may be considered, in their own ways, opposed to the humanist sense of charity which is associated with empowerment and enabling people to achieve self-reliance.

Yet, religions can work for common values which contribute to social capital such as altruism and reciprocity, even if their particular conceptions of it are somewhat different, informed by their own ontologies and mythologies. There is often sufficient similarity in the social outcomes to which such values are seen to contribute for people of different faiths to work together on common causes.

There are many issues on which religious organisations and people of faith may cooperate for the common good. Within the last century, and more markedly within the last decades, there have been many examples of religious dialogue and common action. It has happened in small ways in the suburbs of cities where people of different faiths have come together to deal with racial and religious tensions. In Melbourne, for example, there have been some remarkable examples of cooperative worship involving a wide range of religious groups, Christian and Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, Buddhist and Jew.

There have been world movements which have brought religious groups together to dialogue and to act cooperatively demonstrating the potential for a 'proactivity' which crosses the boundaries of religious tradition. The World Council of Churches has brought together a wide range of Christian groups. The World Conference for Religion and Peace has brought together leaders of the world religions. There has also been widespread cooperation that has crossed denominational and religious boundaries in support of some aid organisations and other organisations concerned with human rights such as Amnesty International.

If religions are to contribute to social capital, it will need to happen through the steps that organisations take to work together on issues of common concern. In pointing to such concerns, they identify ethical principles and ideals which transcend particular religious belief and ethical systems. While religions may develop different justifications for similar concerns, they will find common actions in which they can unite. Social capital could be generated as religious organisations worked together to alleviate poverty, to overcome social injustices, to curb the excesses of consumerism, to tackle the deterioration of the natural environment, for example.

There is, within religion, the potency of inclusiveness. Religion alone can announce the fact and provide the motivation to work towards the expression of the fact that all human beings are siblings, creatures of the one creative process. All human beings live in inter-dependence on each other.

Heaven forbid that we will be dependent on further disasters or even a world war to create more social capital. Whether we like it or not, it seems unlikely that religion is likely to lie down and die. There is no other choice but to engage fervently in the quest for a more peaceful and more trusting world, both through religion and outside of it. Within that process, bridges will be built as common ethical values and common objectives are identified and as people and organisations cooperate for the common good. For, as Kurtz so poignantly states in the conclusion of his book, unless we learn to live together as sisters and brothers within our global neighbourhood, we shall die as fools (1995: 240).

Endnotes

1. The Australian Community Survey conducted by researchers from Edith Cowan University and NCLS Research was made possible by a Collaborative Grant from the Australian Research Council, and the support of ANGLICARE (NSW) and the Board of Mission of the Uniting Church in Australia (NSW). The research has been jointly supervised by Prof. Alan Black and Dr Peter Kaldor. The research team included John Bellamy, Keith Castle and Philip Hughes. The Australian Community Survey consisted of a set of eight questionnaires sent to Australian adults randomly distributed in eight types of community distinguished by the size of rural populations and the socio-economic status of urban populations. Approximately 8500 questionnaires were returned providing a response rate of

50 per cent. Some questions were common to all eight questionnaires while other questions were only contained in one or two versions. This means that the minimum number of respondents completing any question was just over 1000 people.

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