



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Into the Great New World: Pilgrims toward the Common Good

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1. *Through the wardrobe into the great world*

I am a cradle Christian if you like. I grew up in a Hunter Valley coal mining town, attended a local Anglican Church, worked at a Steelworks, went to university, met my wife to be at a church camp; went into fulltime Christian ministry and began a family. Because the deep mysteries of the universe and human life were a perennial source of interest I felt compelled to study theology. I spent the next 25 years teaching and offering leadership in Christian Theological Institutions and being a bishop in the Australian Anglican Church. I managed to do this without ever really getting to know the world of faiths; the people of the great religions of the world; and especially little to do with the religions of the people of the Book, the great Abrahamic religions; Islam and Judaism. I was basically ignorant in such things.

Five years ago, I was appointed as Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. It changed my life. You may be familiar with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of fantasy novels by the 20th century English author, C S Lewis. One of those novels was called, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In that story, the young children go through a cupboard door and into a new world called Narnia. It is a fantasy world of magic, mythical beasts, and talking animals. The series narrates the adventures of the children who play central roles in the unfolding history of that world.

Narnia is literally another world where the great things of life are transacted; where good and evil bump up against one another; where compassion, hospitality and kindness; not to mention the search for truth and the common good are all on the agenda. Coming to the Centre was like going through the cupboard door and into the world of Narnia. It opened my eyes to the great issues of the day: to the social and cultural challenges of living in Australia; of engagement with the religious traditions of the country; of new friends across religious, ethnic and cultural divides. I must be a very slow developer. Waking up to such things is a later life experience. Recently I gave an address with the title *From Faith to Inter-Faith: A Personal Account*. I could not have told such a story 5 years ago. So, I am now a novice on the road.

2. *Pilgrims on the journey*

I use the phrase 'on the road' intentionally. I believe we are all pilgrims travelling uncharted roads in our common life. There are many travellers on the highway of greed, competition, winners and losers, envy, self-interest and violence. But there is another road, the road less travelled. This road does not attract media; it is often ignored or ridiculed or treated with contempt. But this road less travelled is the place of genuine conversations, desire for true friendship; of hospitality and

patience and a common search together for the common good. Pilgrims on this road hold to a rich set of values that find their deepest and most abiding roots in the great religious traditions of the world.

Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and other religious traditions have much in common. For a start, they represent a vast number of human beings who have not given up on the spiritual quest and the question of truth. Certainly, there are differences as you would expect. However, it is only in conversation and through hospitality that we come to truly understand who we are together in our differences. The reality is that the challenges we face draw us inevitably together in a society that is increasingly unsympathetic to the values of the religious traditions that give weight and substance to our human life on the planet. But religions are here to stay. The secular will eventually give way to the post secular. It is the compelling logic of a truly diverse multicultural and multi-faith society where everyone has a place at the table. Eventually in this country the religious traditions will re-emerge as leaven in the lump and bring some needed compassion and care in a competitive, fractious and divided world. Somehow through our common life together we have to find a way beyond the *homo economicus* – I calculate, I choose, I consume and therefore I am; to *homo religious* – I worship therefore I belong.

That being the case there is a great work awaiting those who care for the future of our society and planet. Together we are called to a renewed dialogue with those of religious traditions different from our own. To be frank that is sometimes far easier than trying to have a dialogue with some of my own Christian brothers and sisters! And genuine openness to others requires self-abasement and humility. It means practicing a hospitality without boundaries. It takes place most often and most effectively in ordinary business of life.

3. *The Ramadan Road*

Ramadan is a season to renew our common journey on the road less travelled. A time to invite others to join us on the road to a more humane, compassionate and peaceable society. Ramadan is a time to enter the great new world of Narnia where we contend for truth respectfully and kindly and persist with hope for a better world. For myself, I undertake this journey in the footsteps of Christ. And what I discover is that as I do so with an open heart and spirit I find new friends whose paths cross over with mine. And most of all I find a new connection with other travellers. This doesn't happen by sitting around patting each other on the back. It happens as we train our eyes on the things that matter today; as we open our ears to the voices of those in need; it happens as we offer the hand of friendship to those very different from ourselves; it happens as we expect to learn something new and wholesome from strangers who in turn become our neighbours. The time for fasting during Ramadan is, ironically a time to take on something enriching; of letting go to

receive a gift. It is nothing less than the gift of the good God which we discern in the face of one another.