

## *Dialogue of Civilisations...*

Dato Seri Dr Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, is on record as remarking on the irony that 'globalisation, which tends towards uniformity, is happening in an era of pronounced religious revival ... and intense assertion of cultural identity. More than any other cultural force, religion will become the singular most important force resisting the tendency towards uniformity'.

On Friday 21 July Dr Anwar Ibrahim addressed an audience of around 100 Christians and Muslims on these themes in a forum, jointly sponsored by the Victorian Council of Churches, the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University and the City of Darebin, on the 'Dialogue of Civilisations'. Dr Ibrahim is well-qualified to tackle the Samuel Huntingdon 'clash of civilisations' theory head on: he told the forum both about his strict Muslim upbringing in a Malay village which still informs his religious faith and identity ('I don't drink, not even when I'm in Melbourne'), and also about his love classics of Western literature. He had just come from being keynote speaker at a Shakespeare conference, and was able to quote from Dante, Akhmatova and Tagore with an ease of familiarity that puts most of us to shame. He told how, during six years of imprisonment he not only memorized passages from the Qu'ran but also read through the entire Shakespeare corpus four and a half times, 'and it would have been five times if the Prime Minister had allowed me another six months in prison'. 'I asked Brutus, why did you let Mark Antony speak? I used to wonder about why Hamlet contemplated so long without acting, but I understand Hamlet's inaction now that I've been in prison', he said. Dr Ibrahim's message is simple: our identity as human beings cannot be compartmentalized. We need the humility to recognise ourselves as parts of a great cultural tradition, greater than any of our particular traditions, and ourselves as players in the process of developing human maturity. 'Why can't we – Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists – just grow up? This is bigger than simply interfaith dialogue, though it includes this – it's about values, culture – about human beings, ultimately'. The key concept here is not tolerance, but how to 'know, understand and appreciate one another' – including one's another's faith.

Dr Ibrahim, while acknowledging what he sees as a failure of governance in much of the Muslim world, was equally critical of the neo-con refusal to believe in the compatibility of Islam and democracy. 'You can't force democracy on a people, but it is the arrogance of power that refuses to recognise the moral voice of conscience, which has a spiritual dimension, and the call for justice and gender equality, even though they may appear under unfamiliar names like consultation or working together'. Citing the late Monash academic Herb Feith, Dr Ibrahim argued that constitutional democracy has won acceptance as indigenous to Muslim countries. There is now an ongoing need to encourage, but with patience, moves towards rule of law and independence of the judiciary in Muslim countries. Asked about the problem of exercising power in an ethical way, Dr

Ibrahim replied that he considers it possible to exert influence for good while being in government. 'While Acting Prime Minister - my wife always tells me I don't need to remind audiences I was once Acting PM - I introduced the 1997 anti-corruption legislation in Malaysia: this was very popular with the people, but very unpopular with government ministers, who were of course totally incorruptible'. Dr Ibrahim also spoke of his disagreement with the former Malaysian PM, 'my old friend, Dr Mahatir' over Australia's place in Asia, and called on his Australian audience to see ourselves as part of Asia, while not denying our Christian and European cultural heritage. 'Australia and New Zealand have to be parts of the team', in this emerging Asian renaissance, not as nationalistic entities but as parts of a larger international community.

Anwar Ibrahim is no secularist. He is a strong advocate of the place of religious faith and values in the emerging globalised world: only in this way, he pointed out in response to another questioner, can the current trend to emphasize money rather than quality of life be reversed. And in this, he said, 'I am an optimist: I believe in the strength and wisdom and goodness of the masses'.

Duncan Reid.