

ONE DAY INTERFAITH SYMPOSIUM

FAITH, SOCIAL  
COHESION AND  
COMMUNITY  
RESILIENCE



Affinity  
Intercultural Foundation



MACQUARIE  
University  
SYDNEY • AUSTRALIA

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SUMMARY  
REPORT 2022

This report was written by the academic partner, Associate Professor Julian Droogan (Macquarie University) & event organiser, Mr Ahmet Polat (Affinity Intercultural Foundation)

# EVENT AIMS AND OVERVIEW

The inaugural interfaith symposium 'Faith, Social Cohesion and Community Resilience' took place on Wednesday, June 15, 2022, in Sydney. The aim of the symposium was to highlight and strengthen the positive role played by faith traditions and cultures in Australia's multicultural society, particularly in the wake of the stresses imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and other societal security challenges. The symposium demonstrated how faith communities are an integral element of a diverse society and contribute to societal resilience and social cohesion through times of stress.

The symposium addressed a set of interconnected challenges that have affected faith communities and wider society:

- The growth of religious and political extremism and violence,
- The spread of misinformation and disinformation,
- The rise of pandemic related conspiracy theories, and
- Increased community polarisation.

While religion can be a mobilising factor towards extremism, it is more commonly a platform for forming constructive personal and group-based identities, facilitating social understanding, encouraging positive political engagement, and embodying societal resilience. The symposium succeeded at creating a dialogue between diverse social and religious groups about how our multifaith society has demonstrated resilience to recent crises, the practical lessons learned by faith communities, and how religions can continue to work together to contribute to a healthy and cohesive society.



**MODERATORS**

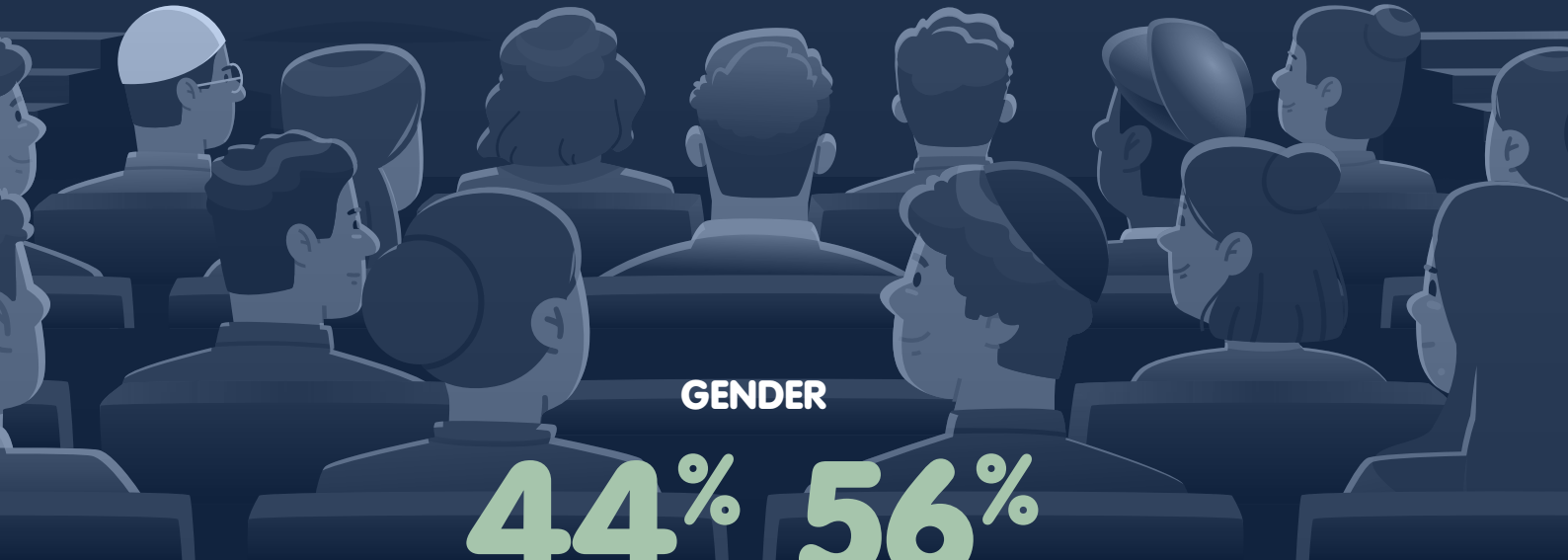
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**PANELS**

8

**SPEAKERS**

29



**GENDER**

44%

FEMALE

56%

MALE

**FAITHS REPRESENTED**

10

Buddhist, Christian (Anglican), Christian (Catholic), Christian (Coptic), Christian (Greek Orthodox), Christian (Uniting Church), Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Zoroastrian

**AUDIENCES**

110

# PROJECT DESIGN

The symposium was designed and delivered by NGO Affinity Intercultural Foundation in collaboration with Macquarie University and funded by the New South Wales Department of Premier and Cabinet.

This innovative model drew on cooperation and resource pooling between grassroots organisations, academia, and government. This positive demonstration of a whole of society approach to complex challenges was highly appreciated by the participants as it provided a new space for pro-social collaboration between diverse social and religious groups, and actively demonstrated the positive support of government in cultivating social cohesion:

*“[The symposium showcased] different groups of people are working hard towards achieving social cohesion and interfaith interactions”*

*“There are so many faith community and even governmental departments that are committed to the principle of social cohesion.”*



# PROJECT OUTCOMES: AIMS

PROJECT AIM	HOW WAS IT FULFILLED	FEEDBACK/OUTCOME
Challenge the misuse of faith by violent extremists	<p>Panel 2 addressed how:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extremists do not reflect the overall beliefs of a certain religion</li><li>• There is a need to educate people on the correct meaning behind faith symbols to prevent misuse</li><li>• Religions must find a way to communicate with one another and the public more effectively</li></ul> <p>Panel 3A addressed how:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Religious leaders should publicly work with other one another to counter the misuse of faiths by extremists</li></ul>	<p>77% of delegates agreed that the symposium allowed delegates to understand how faith can be abused by violent extremists.</p> <p>80% of delegates agreed that they learned how violent extremists can use COVID19 to justify extremist narratives and violence.</p> <p>“The recent research and Covid times elements helped me to feel more up to date”</p>
Highlight the positive role faith traditions play in social cohesion	<p>Panel sessions 2, 3A, and 4B addressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The importance for religious leaders to encourage and model social cohesion</li><li>• The demonstration of faith leaders working together to counter extremism</li><li>• The demonstration of faith leaders working to support pandemic health orders and restrictions to assist with social cohesion and protection against the spread of Covid-19</li><li>• How age and trauma specific support groups run by faith leaders are aimed to help bridge the gap between religious and non-religious community members</li></ul>	<p>100% of delegates agreed that the symposium highlighted the positive role of faith traditions in achieving social cohesion</p> <p>70% of delegates agreed that the symposium left them with a better understanding of different faiths</p> <p><i>“There is a great deal of goodwill about interfaith dialogue with and ambition to continue improving relationships and working together.”</i></p>



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Challenge popular conspiracy theories that mischaracterise faith communities

Panel session 1 challenged conspiracy theories by addressing:

- How the public anxiety caused during Covid-19 was appropriated by extremist groups to further their narratives
- How the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory creates alternative realities and drives violence and racism
- How the diversity in religious views held among far-right extremists can be exploited to develop counter narratives

80% of the respondents agreed that the symposium improved their awareness of misinformation and conspiracy theories

"I learned about the impacts and opportunities that extremists used during COVID"

*"There is willingness and openness of religious communities to participate in the dialogue. The importance of coming together to learn and exchange ideas and experiences."*

Panel 3A addressed conspiracy theories and misinformation by recommending:

- The networking of faith leaders and allocating time to meet at different places of worship to learn from one another and adopt lessons learned in addressing extremism and misinformation
- Generating a multi-faith network that can coordinate Responses to pernicious disinformation

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Build relationships and partnerships across faith communities that strengthen community resilience

Panel sessions 3A and 3B helped build relationships by highlighting how:

- Social cohesion is based on the ability to accept others and build bridges
- Interfaith solidarity is crucial for a multicultural society
- Religious communities and leaders play a role in supporting those suffering from mental health
- NSW government institutions such as Multicultural NSW have been at the forefront of creating harmonious community relations and bringing attention to the rights of minority groups

74% of the delegates agreed that the symposium provided an opportunity to build relationships across faith communities

*"On the 'dialogue' front, I met some great people, had interesting conversations, and have followed up"*

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Empower young people to be champions for community harmony

Panel session 4A empowered young people by:

- Showcasing real life examples of religious discrimination that are often brushed off as crude humour, and effective responses
- Encouraging young people to be active within their local, state, and federal government by building partnerships between faith communities, civil society, and government
- Rephrasing the problem of interfaith by "stop identifying why communities cannot get along, rather focus on the connections that can be made between communities and building towards that common goal"

87% of respondents agreed the event helped empower the youth and provide a platform to meaningfully contribute to the themes of the symposium.

*"I was most impressed by the youth panel! I'm glad to see that Australia is in good hands."*

*"Young friends in attendance agreed with me that this was one of the more substantive interfaith events that challenged their assumptions and exceeded their expectations"*

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Take place no later than 30 May 2022

A decision was made in agreement with the NSW Government to move the symposium to mid-June to avoid it clashing with community events held in May

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# PROJECT OUTCOMES: AIMS

The panels included a diverse array of speakers from civil society, academic, and the public and private sectors representing most of the major faiths practiced in NSW. Panels were moderated by subject matter experts drawn from academia and the media, and designed to facilitate space for 'round table' style discussions between delegates. Conversations were wide-ranging. Notetakers recorded the following key discussion points/outcomes for each panel

PANEL AIM	KEY POINTS DISCUSSED
Keynote session: definitions and intersections: the power of faith in building social cohesion	<p>Faith groups in Australia contribute to social cohesion, harmony, and resilience</p> <p>Misinformation and ignorance about religions can be tackled through open conversations in supportive environments such as this symposium</p> <p>Interfaith dialogue and behaviour that models shared values helps prevent younger generations from forming biased and exclusionary views on religion that focus on hatred rather than our common humanity</p>
Session One: How is Covid-19 being used by extremists within faith groups and what are the social impacts of Covid-19 on misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories?	<p>Stressed the need for better-organised communication channels and cooperation between health practitioners, authorities, and religious communities</p> <p>Religious discrimination can be challenged by establishing a framework for the governing of religious diversity that protect religious practices</p> <p>Grassroots interfaith initiatives allow religious leaders to counter false claims, negative stigmatization, and conspiracy theories through demonstrating peace, compassion, and service to the community</p>
Session Two: how can faith communities respond when symbols of faith are appropriated by hate groups?	<p>Educating people on the multi-layered meaning behind religious symbols can build tolerance</p> <p>When framing security challenges, the adoption of a positive peace framework helps strengthen societal resilience</p> <p>Religiously motivated social activism can help to prevent the public accommodation of hate</p> <p>Progress has been made, but many religions and their leaders need to find ways to communicate more effectively with contemporary society</p>

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Session Three A: how can religious actors build bridges across communities impacted by recent crises?

Faith leaders should be vocal, public, and open in talking about crises and what they can do to protect and care for others outside of their immediate communities

Networks between faith communities, and between faith communities and government contribute to crisis management and resilience

Faith leaders can take the same initiative that was seen after the Martin Place Siege and issue a statement of interfaith solidarity, to be complimented by visits between communities and the sharing of lessons learnt

Religious leaders can do more to work with the government to encouraging the people in their community to follow new laws, restrictions, and precaution measures

When assisting people impacted by crises, faith communities must not focus on conversion but on public service

The establishment of age and trauma specific support and discussion groups should include both religious and non-religious communities

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Session Three B: interreligious and cultural dialogue approaches and solution examples in solving these problems

Interfaith dialogue facilitates acceptance, understanding, and builds relationships that empower communities and individuals to speak against religious discrimination and violence

Interfaith dialogue builds relationships of trust that allow Muslims and Christians to understand and appreciate one another's religious perspectives

There is scope for religious communities to present a joint statement to the government on the banning of some hate symbols

People should be educated about how religious symbols are complex, have multiple meaning, as this form of education can build tolerance

Faith communities can partner with schools to teach young people about different faiths from an objective, comparative, and non-confessional perspective

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Session Four A: youth leadership perspectives on extremism & belonging

A youth perspective on faith and social cohesion is essential as they are the next generation of faith leadership, but also the next generation of extremists

More effort can be applied to empowering young people to build cross-cultural and cross-religious networks

Youth-led education can reduce fear about other religions and consequential discrimination and misinformation

Youth-led education can also assist in catching misinformation and extremist behaviour in young people in a timely fashion

A key focus should be on the factors that drive extremism (economics, mental health, and ideology), and providing pathways for youth away from extremist identity formation

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Session Four B: empowering religious leaders & communities: what is the role of faith in building social cohesion?

It is fundamental to teach values such as multiculturalism and interfaith respect

Religious communities can work together to address social issues, learn from one another, and share experiences to build social cohesion and enhance collaboration between diverse interfaith groups

There is opportunity for religious groups to include Indigenous spiritual perspectives and to work together to contribute to Indigenous reconciliation

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# MAJOR LEARNINGS

**EMPOWERING FAITH:** The symposium allowed delegates to learn more about their own and other faiths. The experience instilled a confidence to build cohesive relationships with the wider community. A common theme was the diversity of Australian religions, but inability for many religious groups to act within this diverse space. Many speakers focussed on the benefit this religious diversity brings, but also the need for faith groups to be more proactive in reaching out across communities with an aim to social service, rather than conversion.

*“[The symposium showcased] the importance of coming together to learn and exchange ideas and experiences.”*



**CONNECTING AND STAYING CONNECTED:** The importance of collaboration and networking between different cultural and faith groups was emphasised. Much discussion centred on the benefit of coming together in supportive and productive forums such as the symposium, but also creating frameworks to allow faith groups and leaders to stay connected and to regularly engage in conversations and to work towards mutual goals and address specific challenges. For many, the symposium provided the first opportunity to come together in this way and establish long-term connections with willing and open colleagues, and to engage in difficult discussions about key topics.

*“[The symposium] has been a great opportunity for me to network with different groups”*



**DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS:** The importance and benefits accrued by including a diverse group of faiths and civil society representatives was emphasised throughout the symposium and in feedback from delegates. There was enthusiastic support for working with a wider variety of faiths and more diverse groups of people than are commonly present at government supported events to gain a better understanding of the wide array of community voices. The symposium facilitated a space for having difficult discussion in which all members did not necessarily agree on everything but are willing to work together in good faith to explore the questions and find common solutions. As Reverend Dr Patrick McInerney stated, "It is not about unity but cooperation", meaning that faith groups do not necessarily have to agree, but their ongoing cooperation and joint effort produces a cohesive social response to complex challenges.

*"[The conference helped me appreciate] the importance of hearing, understanding, and appreciating the significance of the diverse voices of roles they play in our society."*





**YOUTH LEADERSHIP:** The voices of young people about how to build socially cohesive relationships within and between faiths were inspiring and provided new ways of thinking about the relationship between faiths, interfaith dialogue, and social cohesion. As one youth panellist noted:

*“The youth panel consisted of young leaders from their respective faith communities who shared a substantive vision on the topic from their faith tradition, rather than a superficial analysis. This is important because it facilitates robust conversations”*

The youth leadership panel emphasised the importance of building relationships through friendship and reaching out to others across faith boundaries. As another panellist noted: “A lot can be done towards enhancing understanding of different faith groups. Reaching out, connectedness, and friendship is the positive way for social cohesion.”

When asked if participants had any suggestions on how to improve the symposium, or grow it in future, many expressed their desire to include more young speakers: “More young speakers and voices. Young speakers were excellent.”



**BARRIERS:** Delegates reported several barriers that prevented them from applying their learning from the symposium to their work in the community, to building connections, and to continuing the dialogue. These included the need for more engaging and practical learning programs delivered by people of faith to help them reach out into the grassroots community and schools. In addition, time constraints and the need for more financial support for outreach programs was noted.

There was a strong consensus that there are not enough events such as the symposium that allowed faith groups to meet, discuss, and work together in a structured way. Many religious groups and individuals wanted to engage with multi-faith communities but did not know how. There was a perception that some dominant institutional religions still struggle to integrate an interfaith perspective and therefore their voice is almost, if not completely, excluded from these dialogues. The support of the NSW government in providing a space for this dialogue was highly appreciated and commended.

*“There is a great deal of goodwill about interfaith dialogue with an ambition to continue improving relationships and working together”*



# NEXT STEPS

- There is scope for greater government investment in structured and targeted interfaith opportunities at a State and Federal level. Initiatives encompassing grassroots civil society, academia, and government demonstrate a whole-of-society response to complex societal challenges and demonstrate an active counter narrative to extremism and social polarisation. They both embody and promote social cohesion.
- More effort can be concentrated on attracting smaller faith groups that may be associated with difficult and hard to reach communities, as well as on attracting the buy-in from some of the larger and more well-established religious institutions.
- A framework that encompasses regular annual interfaith dialogue would provide established lines of communication between faith communities, wider civil society, and government. These lines of communication can be mobilised during times of societal stress. Some ongoing topics such as Indigenous reconciliation and responses to climate change are well suited to an interfaith community response.
- There is scope to build upon this symposium to include more young people and representatives from the first nations communities in future events. Formats that include interactive workshop style activities as well as interactive round-table discussions can be designed to produce tangible community generated outcomes that promote and embody social cohesion.



We would like to acknowledge and thank the following Macquarie University student volunteers for their contributions to this report: Mr. Nicolo Miotto, Ms. Malwa Bajwa, Ms. Eesha Brar, Ms. Yvonne Hartwig, and Ms. Eve Slater.



# APPENDIX:

## QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES BY CATEGORY

Feedback was collected from panellists and audience members at the conclusion of the conference and via email. Overall, 69 delegates responded with formative feedback.

- **77%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that the symposium allowed delegates to understand how faith can be abused by violent extremists.
- **80%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that they learned how violent extremists can use COVID19 to justify extremist narratives and violence.
- **100%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that the symposium showcased how faith can play a positive role in fostering social cohesion.
- **90%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that the symposium provided a platform for youth to meaningfully contribute to the overall conversational theme of the symposium.
- **75%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that their awareness of the social impacts of the misinformation/disinformation/malformation/conspiracy theory have improved.
- **70%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that the symposium left them with a better understanding about different faiths.
- **82%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that the symposium provided them with an opportunity to engage with and meet people from different faith traditions.
- **79%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that after attending the symposium, they felt more confident to be able to connect with people from other faiths in their community.
- **80%** of delegates either strongly agreed or agreed that the themes of the symposium are relevant to their work in the community/workplace.

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## DELEGATE QUOTES

*“Australia is unique in its religious and cultural diversity.”*

*“It was rewarding to be in a room with such brilliant thinkers”*

*“I had a great day of rich learning”*

*“An ethic of compassion and diversity education are needed at school and community levels.”*

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## SPEAKER QUOTES

*“We all come from the same place”*

– Mr. Ahmet Orhan Polat

*“Interfaith dialogue breaks down ignorance”*

– Ms. Maha Krayem Abdo OAM

*“Religious exclusivism and lack of religious pluralism is an obstacle to interfaith dialogue and relations”*

– Professor John Esposito

*“Interfaith dialogue is about having difficult discussions”*

– Associate Professor Julian Droogan

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*“Radicalisation is a social process”*

– Professor Greg Barton

*“During the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceived dangers of conspiracy theories and misinformation were brought into sharper focus”*

– Professor Kevin Dunn

*“Healthy society needs healthy religion”*

– Emeritus Professor Desmond Cahill OAM

*“Religions must find a way to communicate with contemporary society”*

– Reverend Dr. Patrick McLnerne

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# PROUD SUPPORTERS



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