

Premier Kristina Keneally

Speech at Reception for Women's Interfaith Network

State Parliament House, Wednesday 10 March 2010

- Ms Josie Lacey, OAM
- Representatives of the various faiths including:

Indigenous Australian, Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Christian denominations including Anglican, Roman Catholic, Uniting Church and Quaker.

I am so pleased to be able to welcome you here and to host this reception, because I am pleased that, as Premier, I can continue to support this important network - and a group that I have already been associated with for many years – initially through my friendship with Josie Lacey.

Josie is a prominent member of Sydney's Jewish community and an inter-faith activist, and was instrumental in founding the Women's Interfaith Network. My early support for the Women's Interfaith Network extended – beyond my own enthusiasm – to normal duties that a local MP could assist with... like providing a space to meet – which I did as an official parliamentary sponsor when I was a first term backbencher.

I would not have expected at that time to find myself, years later, speaking to you in the capacity of Premier.

But in finding myself in this office I also find myself known – very publicly - as a woman of faith. And what is also now on display...for anyone with a web browser to see...is that I am a woman who has wrestled with questions about my faith.

Within a day of my election the Herald had dug out my theology thesis, and quipped that the question of..... “whether the gender fluidity of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor might challenge the Christian tradition to new patterns of thought and praxis in regards to women as *in imago Christi*”..... was “not a question you would be running past your average NSW ALP caucus member.”

Probably true.

And neither is that a question you would run past your average lay Catholic either. But I'm inquisitive by nature, and was known, from an early age, to test assumptions about a faith that I held, and still hold, dear.

An example of this testing that I still recall fondly was a student article I published regarding the survival of Moses. This documented how Moses' survival and therefore the entire fate of the Exodus rested in the hands of five brave women,

most of whom go unnamed and unthanked for their efforts. This piece raised more than one eyebrow at the time ...for in my church.....as in many religious organisations....there are some sectors in which such “testing” is welcomed.....and in others, less so.

Other women here may have similar experiences from their own faith communities...

There is irony in that our spiritualities seek to interpret and explain some of our most complex experiences as humans.....and yet, on occasion, leaders of those spiritualities have sought to interpret our mysteries in absolute terms.

For this reason, the quality of ‘doubt’ has had to be defended at a number of stages in the history of my faith.

The colloquial term “the doubting Thomas” – a Christian gift to the English language – infers that doubt is a negative quality. Strangely enough, this reminds me of politics.....an environment in which doubt and nuance are, I think, being given diminishing respect over time.

There is an increasing expectation – particularly in media – towards certainty and concretism in public life and public language.

“I am certain...”

“There can be no doubt that....”

“We are absolutely committed to.....”

And yet, the reality of this state alone is one of seven million individual lives.....which in turn draw upon an infinite combination of cultural and spiritual backgrounds.

Whilst there are some decisions that involve a clear distinction between “right” and “wrong”, the majority involve determining a point on a vast balance of competing ideas and interests.

You might think, then, that we should be embracing capacity for doubt and nuance in our leaders.

And there is, I believe, something vital to our society about allowing space for doubt...

....space for nuance....

....space for the alternate view

....and that we should allow that space to be a peaceful one.

This last requirement makes the adversarial hurly burly of Parliament perhaps not a great model in this regard.....but what the Interfaith Network has created is.

This network sets an example - not just to religious leadership but leadership as a whole. It is the example of embracing openness, ambiguity, doubt, and nuance. Ecumenical or interfaith activity shows us how opening ourselves to alternate views does not diminish our own beliefs. In fact the opposite is true: it refines, hones and strengthens them.

After all...if I hone a new facet on a precious stone, I allow more light into it, and more brilliance out of it.

For this reason, interfaith intentionally creates community spaces in which differing ideas can intermingle in peace and collaboration.

And just not any ideas – ideas that go to the most fundamental and most personal aspects of each woman who participates.

Yet those ideas co-exist in peace..... without competition..... without proselytising.

At the risk of being labelled sexist, there is something that is, in my experience, deeply feminine about this particular aspect of the Network and your area of work:...the ability to be with someone else's spiritual reality.....one that may be totally different to your own..... and to do just that... ...to simply be with it.

And when I say 'feminine' I mean it in the broadest sense of female capacity.....for while what the Network creates is something quite beautiful, it is also something genuinely strong.

What it shows us, above all, is that all members of the Interfaith Network have genuine, solid, mature connection with their faith. Theirs is faith that welcomes alternative ways of seeing into their lives without fear or suspicion.

This is faith in its truest sense.

For as Lord Alfred Tennyson wrote in his famous exploration of the challenges of belief; *"There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds."*

The women of the Interfaith lead by example in many ways

- They show how our beliefs – personal or political – should always be open to examination, and why that examination should be welcomed.
- They show seeking out what we share in our difference is always more profitable than mining where we differ.

• And they show open exchange with those of different backgrounds provides the enlightenment that turns fanaticism and ignorant bigotry to dust.

After all, what is fanaticism but the inability to confidently face the ambiguities that we all encounter in beliefs, when they are challenged by the experience of life? Incapacity to have our matters of belief....

.... be they spiritual or political.....

tested in an open way, can create suppression of the rights and beliefs of others....

.... and our history shows that all too often this leads us down a dangerous and destructive path.

For all these reasons I remain proud to support this group.and not only because I am a woman of faith myself.....but because of the example that the Interfaith Network provides to our civil, secular society.

NSW's diversity is after all, one of its greatest strengths – culturally, socially, creatively and economically.

The deeper we embrace that diversity.....the more we learn from it.....the stronger and richer our lives.....both as individuals and as communities.

And in order to embrace that diversity we must all be able to place ourselves in a space that allows room for ...

....question without threat...

... doubt without fear...

... nuance without loss of fidelity...

... difference without confrontation.

So thank you for providing an example.....a way of seeing.....and a way of being.....that I believe we all have something to learn from.

~ ENDS ~