

Is it safe to go to the beach? - Racial Tensions

There is nothing like being overseas and reading a local newspaper to find that there have been race riots in your home town. But this is what I found in the Malaysian press (New Straits Times) on 13 December 2005 with a photograph showing a group of white males harassing a person of middle-eastern appearance on a train going to Cronulla. Why was this happening in a multicultural country with such a proud record of acceptance of others and founded on egalitarianism?

As Australia's most recent migrants from the middle-east will tell us, different communities within Australia are not always accepting of new people with new ideas, technologies, beliefs and customs. Yet the other side of this picture is one of Australia absorbing peoples from all over the world and would, barring incidents like the Cronulla beach riot, be considered one of the safest and most tolerant of countries. Its multicultural, multi-faith and multiracial community makes it, in some people's minds, a study for other countries with high immigration.

However, until more recent times, migrants were expected to be like the existing Australians who had mainly British and Irish backgrounds, if they were to become Australians. The Chinese in the goldfields, the south sea islanders in the cane fields, the European refugees and skilled migrant workers after World War II are all examples of Australia's tolerance; that is, you can come if it suits us and, if you do come, you'd better soon be like us. (Milner 1993)

The ambivalence is that Australians love the people they know, irrespective of their cultural background, because they are their mates. But they fear the people they don't know, especially if they are part of a new group to Australian society. Our history shows that it is always the latest group of migrants that is most feared. Last night I watched a news item promoting a fear of Sudanese because they may be carrying exotic diseases. Are African people to be the new focus of our fears after we come to terms with the current influx of middle eastern migrants?

For Christians, these events have raised serious questions about our ability to impact a Christian view within a secular society. As is often the case with a new migrant group, families tend to locate close to each other until the second generation branch out through employment and marriage into the wider community. Within Sydney, there are areas more dominated by particular groups, including where I live which is strongly Chinese and Korean. But there are some parts of Sydney that are relatively untouched by migration. Sutherland Shire is one such place. This area has individual migrant families, but no significant migrant group. The people of the Shire are proud of their environment and can be resentful of others who come to enjoy its natural beauty, unless these others look and behave exactly as they do. (Carey 2005)

Over a number of years there have been reports of women being harassed by groups of mainly young males of middle-eastern appearance. This ethnic descriptor has itself caused some comment resulting in a Christmas cartoon (Leunig, 2005) showing an angel speaking to some shepherds and saying *Unto us a saviour will be born and you will find him in a manger and he will be of middle eastern appearance.*

Some of these groups believed that the beach dress of some females was inappropriate, giving them the right to make them the subject of sexual abuse which was at least verbal and sometimes physical. When reported to police by victims and their parents, there appears little action was taken and so a potential time bomb grew and exploded in December 2005

Some locals wanted to take a stand resulting in an outpouring of racial hatred against any person of middle-eastern appearance. In response, some of the middle-eastern people retaliated with a wave of vandalism through some of the beachside suburbs. However, an additional element added to the confusion as these actions unleashed the small neo-Nazi element in the community that fuelled the tension both through talk-back radio and anti-social action.

Then the police intervened in force. Everyone withdrew, and sanity prevailed within days. Christians like the rest of the community were left to ask how did we ever get to this?

The ambivalence of Australians is caught up in this event. While acceptance of others (especially the ones we know) pervades the Australian community the fear of the unknown other is also strong.

In terms of national identity, Australians are asking questions about their identity and what makes a person Australian. They are questioning the Christian heritage in law, government, institutions, customs and values even if only to reaffirm that, in a dominantly secular society, these are what they still want.

For teachers, values education is on the agenda again. Teaching values is about bringing them to the surface in lessons and making explicit what was implicit. It is about looking at the range of values positions in areas of social and political controversy so that respect might be developed for other people's rights to hold different views. This is not the same as accepting all differences (Aoki 1994), because not all differences are good, some are illegal, culturally inappropriate and offensive, but acknowledging that other people have a right to hold a different even an opposing view is a characteristic of respect.

In this regard, it is not enough to promote the value of tolerance. "Tolerance" has a meaning of "putting up with". Perhaps both the people of the Shire and visitors with different cultural backgrounds had put up with enough. Respect for other peoples rights within the rule of law was needed, not simply tolerance.

While Christians were good at speaking against the violence on both sides and participating in reconciliation discussions and gestures after the event, they failed to attract media attention to a Christian position. What was Jesus' intention in the parable of the "Good Samaritan"? Why did Jesus bother with the Samaritan woman at the well? Should Christians fear Islam?

Within religions and secular world views there are minorities who can pose some kind of threat to the community. For this reason we have the rule of law. Is it safe to go to the beach? Yes it is, providing you respect the right of others to be different to you and you obey Australian law.

John Gore