

Esteemed religion journalist Rachael Kohn receives ACU's highest honour

One of the most recognised voices on ABC Radio is now the recipient of an honorary degree from Australian Catholic University (ACU).

Dr Rachael Kohn AO, respected religion journalist and long-time host of ABC Radio National's *The Spirit of Things*, accepted a Doctor of the University at ACU's graduation ceremony in Sydney on 13 May.

"I was deeply honoured and elated to learn of the ACU's intention to confer an honorary doctorate on me," Dr Kohn said. "I was at home checking emails and of course this one contained a wonderful surprise."

The Canadian-Australian journalist and author, who started as a university academic in religious studies before commencing a 26-year-long broadcast career, is one of Australia's leading religion reporters and speakers.

In her Occasional Address to ACU graduates, Dr Kohn offered valuable advice to students who aspire to be in media.

"Become an expert in an important field, learn all you can about a subject and eschew the siren call of social media," Dr Kohn said.

"Take time to become highly knowledgeable and love every minute of your education. Avail yourselves of great mentors. Then you will be ready to contribute to and more importantly improve the quality of our media.

"Journalism is not just the 'who, what, why, where, when' questions. Anybody can do that. Being a journalist worthy of note is knowing the really important questions to ask, and those only come from deep knowledge."

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Zlatko Skrbis, said Dr Kohn was a worthy recipient of ACU's highest honour.

"Over the course of her career, Dr Kohn has encouraged serious, informed and non-partisan conversations about the faiths by which people live," Professor Skrbis said.

"In doing so, she has made an outstanding contribution to the well-being of the nation, and particularly to relations between people of different faiths.

"During her broadcast career, Dr Kohn was also a fantastic supporter of our university, attending many faculty events as either a speaker or a guest. On behalf of ACU, I hereby congratulate Dr Kohn."

Educating the public through journalism

Although she became a household name to thousands of ABC listeners, Dr Kohn never sought out a career in journalism.

Initially drawn to the study of Judaism and Christianity at university, she pursued a career in higher education as an academic, teaching religion studies at universities in Canada, the UK and Australia.

She got her first taste for broadcast while lecturing at the University of Sydney, when she was invited onto the ABC to comment on religious matters. Her insights turned into a job offer within the public broadcaster's Religion beat which she initially thought to turn down.

"Eventually I really considered that it might be a more effective way of actually educating people about religion, so I joined the ABC in 1992 and then embarked on this extraordinary career covering religion in many different ways," Dr Kohn explained on the last episode of *The Spirit of Things*.

Created by Dr Kohn in 1997, *The Spirit of Things* explored contemporary religious experiences, and saw Dr Kohn interview high profile – and on occasion controversial – religious and spiritual leaders. She lists the late Lord Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, and the Dalai Lama among her most impressive subjects.

“But in truth there were many, many great minds whom I had the great honour of meeting and whose works I read carefully,” she said.

“I’ve also had some hair-raising encounters that I prefer to forget!”

Why faith and religion matters

Born into a Jewish family in 1953, Dr Kohn said her faith had always been “my lodestar, my guide, my anchor”.

“Today however it is tinged with grief and even fear as the rampant and violent expressions of antisemitism have infected portions of the populace, the media and university campuses,” Dr Kohn said.

“Judaism has always taught vigilance as well as hope and at present I feel the overwhelming need for both.”

Reflecting on the changing religious landscape in Australia, particularly the increasing demographic of people who adhere to no religion, Dr Kohn said the contempt for Australia’s biblical heritage “has opened the way for a host of extreme secular belief systems that are intolerant and dangerous and purport to be more ‘rational’ than our religious traditions”.

She warns of “the danger of the mob mind” but continues to hold hope in younger generations.

“There is however evidence that the verities of the biblical traditions on which our western civilisation is built are being rediscovered by some of the younger generation,” she said.

“Religion is more relevant than ever but it will only be recognised as such when more people stand up and proclaim its truths and refuse to be bullied into silence by ill-informed anti-Western voices bent on its destruction.”

Having given 26 years to the Australian media, she said more could be done “to promote the Western values and the religious heritage on which its very profession was founded”.

“Many countries, most especially totalitarian and theocratic states do not have free media because their religions do not enable freedom of conscience, equality of the sexes and the questioning mind,” Dr Kohn said.

“We should be using our media to champion our unique religious heritage, and to call out repressive practices wherever they appear in our society, otherwise we will soon be living in an unrecognisable Australia.”

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