

## **Dr Rachael Kohn AO talks religion, democracy, and the individual at ACU's Interfaith breakfast**

Award-winning journalist Dr Rachael Kohn says true democracy needs all Australians, regardless of religious belief, to “work together in common cause”.

Dr Kohn made her comments at the annual Federal Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfast co-hosted by Australian Catholic University and Speaker of the House of Representatives Milton Dick MP on 21 November, 2024.

Addressing an audience of more than 200 people, including parliamentarians and faith and community leaders, Dr Kohn said Australian democracy relied on acknowledging the contributions of religion and history, not “distorting the past and pouring contempt on our faith traditions”.

“Yet, today’s ‘Vanguard of the New’ is eager to paint the recorded past in the darkest of terms, for how else to elevate new schemes and make them look full of promise?” Dr Kohn said.

“The Vanguard of the New presents our history as a litany of failure, denies every virtue that our forebears upheld, and rubbishes every step of progress that they laboured to achieve in the most adverse circumstances.”

Drawing from her own experience as a Jewish Canadian who emigrated to Australia in 1987, one of her first attempts to promote peaceful democracy was joining Jewish communal organisation B’nai B’rith.

“It was the first group I joined when I came to Australia, because our chapter, The Anti-Defamation Unit, was devoted to interfaith dialogue and combatting prejudice and racism,” she said.

It was a different experience for her parents, who lived through the “horrors and loss” caused by Nazism and the “dictatorial and punitive regime of Communism” in their home country of Czechoslovakia.

“My parents’ experience of totalitarianism, expropriation, murder of my father’s brothers, wives, children, cousins, aunts and uncles, all because they were Jewish, was of great significance to me,” Dr Kohn said.

“It meant that I had little patience for any ideology that carried the whiff of totalitarianism.

“But neither did I have any sympathy for the proliferation of pseudo-religious cults, which robbed individuals of their civic freedoms, spelled the end of their individual human dignity, their agency and conscience. Cult practises of deceit, brainwashing, kidnapping, and sometimes murder and enforced suicide, is a phenomenon I have followed for decades.”

Instead, she saw the “nobler purpose and mission” of religion and how it could contribute positively to Australian society, firstly as an academic and then a journalist with the ABC, establishing herself as a household name for 26 years.

“And it was that story of religion’s contribution to Australia that I wanted to share with the public in my books, my talks and my programs on ABC Radio National,” Dr Kohn said.

“For example, Mary Mackillop established and ran her schools for destitute children, including Aboriginal children, and eventually founded the Sisters of Saint Joseph, which today runs hundreds of schools. When the church excommunicated her for a spell, and in desperate need of a place for her students, it was a Jewish businessman, Emanuel Solomon, in South Australia, who gave shelter to Mary and her charges.”

Across 1700 programs that she produced and presented, Dr Kohn interviewed thousands of highly respected religious leaders – from Archbishops, Chief rabbis, the Dalai Lama, local clerics, imams and lay people, professionals and scholars, to “unsung heroes” who found a greater purpose through faith.

These interviews, according to Dr Kohn, demonstrated the ways in which religion could encourage community, and therefore, strengthen Australian democracy.

“Democracy needs us all to work together in common cause,” she said.

“Religion has aided that effort by reminding us of our moral purpose and sharing the means by which we choose our ‘better selves’ and by which trust can be established and reinforced among disparate people.

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“The West has turned that moral purpose and trust into a democratic ideal that respects the individual, yet expects each of us to uphold law and order and thereby secure the common good for every Australian.

“And to me, that is what the relationship between democracy, religion, and the individual is all about.”

Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis said Dr Kohn’s message echoed the vision of the Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfast, which ACU has hosted across 10 years. He thanked the many leaders, both political and faith-based, for their support since the first Interfaith Breakfast in 2014.

“For a decade, this event has given us an opportunity to come together – people of diverse faiths, cultures and political persuasions – to engage in discussion and prayer, and to reflect on the important role that religions serve in our communities,” Professor Skrbis said.

“At its simplest, this event is a get-together. It is an expression of the willingness of people of different faith traditions to walk together and form a community – a plural community, but one that is united, nonetheless, by a shared commitment to the democratic values of which faith traditions are a fundamental part.

“I thank you once again for joining us at the 2024 Federal Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfast, and for helping us to continue what is now a 10-year tradition of promoting interfaith harmony.”

**Additional photos available on request.**

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