

AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN VALUES INSTITUTE

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SUBMISSION TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION ON FREEDOM OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN THE 21ST Century

Australia should maintain the extent of freedom of religion and belief in the 21st Century, which its citizens prospered under in the 19th and 20th Centuries. If it does so, Australia will be well served. The litmus test will be whether, in the 21st Century, the major codified religious belief in Australia, Christianity, can continue to freely worship, preach and teach from its primary source, the Bible, and employ and appoint office-bearers who it chooses, as it has always done, without breaching human rights and equal opportunity laws and policies.

Regretfully, in recent decades, the direction of human rights and equal opportunity legislation and policies upon the freedom to preach and teach from the Bible has been towards censorship. This has been the trend in a number of comparable western countries, and the implementation of the Victorian state government anti-vilification legislation is a worrying demonstration of a similar path that some Australian legislators have embarked upon. At its most serious was the conviction of the “Two Dannys” in Victoria, and the consequent intimidation the conviction has created. At its most trivial are Christmas season campaigns by human rights and equal opportunity purists, banning nativity scenes and plays at schools, and the singing or playing of Christian carols in public areas, claiming that they are offensive to and an infringement of the human rights and equal opportunity of non Christians. In fact they are part of the secular Christmas heritage as many non-Christians attest, just as many specifically Christian values are upheld by non-Christians.

Also, the issue of freedom of religion and belief in the 21st Century in Australia cannot be fully considered without addressing Australia’s Christian heritage. It has had an enormously beneficial effect upon our public institutions, and freedom of religion and belief, both pre and post the 1901 Constitution. It provides Australia with an invaluable legacy in the 21st Century.

If a 21st Century concept of religious freedom and belief, whatever it may be, were to diminish or discount the key role of Australia's Christian heritage and legacy, it would jeopardize the existing freedoms that all Australians enjoy. If Australia's Christian heritage is diminished or allowed to wither, then eventually, so too will the benefits of that heritage. The benefits will be like cut flowers, they will have no roots. The Australian Christian Values Institute is concerned that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission may not be assisting in the maintenance of the benefits that flow from Australia's Christian heritage.

The Australian Christian Values Institute agrees with the Hon Peter Costello, MP, who in his 2009 Australia Day message said, "One of the things that has been absolutely central to the development of Australia and the foundation of our society is ... (Australia's) ... Biblical heritage ... That's been the foundation of our society. It's been the basis of our tolerance of each other and of order. It has been the basis of creating opportunity for so many Australians. If we forget that tradition ... then we as a society will be threatened with the breakdown of that order, will be threatened with losing our heritage and losing opportunity."

The ACVI also believes that people of all faiths who choose to leave or change their faith should be free to do so without fear of harassment or violence. In 2007, Christian and Muslim groups in Norway signed a joint declaration to this effect. Those who leave or change their faith should have the protection of the law in doing so. They should not be liable to any penalty or reprisal, but should be free to follow their new convictions without fear, in accordance with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We believe that the Australian Government should do more to use its influence on governments of countries where punishments for apostasy are part of the legal system, or have become ingrained in community attitudes, to encourage abolition of the law and change in public opinion.

Freedom of religion and belief in the 21st Century in Australia will depend upon freedom to worship, teach and preach from the source of Christianity which is the Bible, and freedom for Christian institutions to employ and appoint office-holders of their choosing. People should be free to leave or change their faith without fear of reprisals. These freedoms should not be made subject to the ebb and flow of political agendas that permeate human rights and equal opportunity activism throughout the world, including in Australia.

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