

Religious Discrimination Bill 2021
The Age

A moderate protection for religious liberty

The great figure of American history and the star character of today's favourite musical, Hamilton, had this to say about religious liberty:

“Remember civil and religious liberty always go together, if the foundation of the one be sapped, the other will fall of course.” (Alexander Hamilton, *A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress*, 1774)

After a long wait, we are now looking at a Religious Discrimination Bill in our federal Parliament, and it should be welcomed by all Australians, including the over 60% who profess a religious belief. The proposed law protects religious belief or activity, but also the right to not have a religious faith or participate in religious events.

If you believe in freedom for all, then you should support liberty to people of all faiths and none. If you believe in values like fairness, diversity and giving people a fair go, then you should support religious organisations being able to conduct their work according to their religious mission. It is perfectly normal for a range of views and beliefs to interact in a healthy democracy, and it is therefore reasonable to expect the laws of the land to protect each of those groups, especially if they are minority religious and ethnic ones who are vulnerable or face hostility.

More broadly, schools are an obvious example. Parents send their children to Catholic and other religious schools for a purpose – they want a Catholic education and it is reasonable to protect their right to do so.

In Australia, we aren't used to having to talk about religious freedom largely because we've taken it for granted. We are unlike other parts of the world in which you can lose your job, be locked up without charge, have your children denied an education, all because of the place you attend for worship. We should be grateful we don't face such heavy-handed discrimination.

Nevertheless, we would be a naive nation if we thought that serious discrimination on religious grounds does not occur, or cannot happen in Australia. My friends in other faith communities, including Jewish and Muslim ones, have shared stories that send a chill up my spine – tales of real discrimination and pain caused to people in the schools and families of their communities. In my own Christian tradition, I am hearing more and more tales of distress from young people whose reputation is torn apart online or who get socially ostracised because they express a religious view. That is not fair, and to be frank we should consider it un-Australian.

Given the increasing number of real challenges being faced by people of faith, the time is right to pass a law to protect their wellbeing, and to give parity to religious freedom alongside other important laws against discrimination. The Bill is moderate and should be un-controversial.

In fact, the Bill does not provide complete protection from every anti-religious discrimination, but it is at least a good start and a perfectly sensible foundation. It is something we can all rally around and support, without any fear of other rights being lost.

If you are not a believer, that's fine, no one is demanding that you change your mind. But out of fairness, I ask you to give your support to the protection of religious faith on the basis that in a free and open society, that's the right thing to do.

As Hamilton could see, civil and religious liberty always go together.

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