



# National Council of Churches in Australia

17 January 2018

The Hon Philip Ruddock

Chair

Inquiry into the status of the human right to freedom of religion or belief.

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## **Summary:**

The essence of our submission is to re-affirm the importance of religious freedom; the connection between all human rights and the divine purpose; the importance of education and practised living of these matters in contemporary Australia.

### **1. Terms of Reference.**

#### **Objective**

The Panel shall examine and report on whether Australian law (Commonwealth, State and Territory) adequately protects the human right to freedom of religion.

#### **Scope**

In undertaking this Review, the Panel should:

Consider the intersections between the enjoyment of the freedom of religion and other human rights.

Have regard to any previous or ongoing reviews or inquiries that it considers relevant.

Consult as widely as it considers necessary.

Report to the Prime Minister by 31 March 2018.

### **2. May we begin our submission with a reminder as to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

#### **Article 2**

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

#### **Article 18.**

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in

Anglican Church

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Armenian Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Chinese Methodist Church

Churches of Christ

Congregational Federation

Coptic Orthodox Church

Greek Orthodox Church

Indian Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Roman Catholic Church

Romanian Orthodox Church

Syrian Orthodox Church

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church

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community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

### **3. About ourselves: The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA)**

The National Council of Churches in Australia, Inc (NCCA) was established in 1994 as the successor organisation to the Australian Council of Churches. The NCCA consists of 18 member Churches representing a wide range of Christian traditions in Australia.

The NCCA is structured as a Company Limited by Guarantee.

(<http://www.ncca.org.au/forums/9th-national-forum/9th-national-forum-documents/253-ncca-constitution/file>)

Governance is the responsibility of a Board of Directors drawn from the member Churches. The Board appoints a General Secretary to manage the day-to-day operations of the Council and its staff.

The policy-making body of the NCCA is the triennial Forum and representatives of the member Churches are also able to contribute to NCCA work through Assemblies held three times each year.

The NCCA is a member of the Christian Conference of Asia and has continuing cooperative links with the World Council of Churches and with State-based ecumenical bodies in Australia.

Whilst this submission comes from me as President, it has been shared with other NCCA Board members and with Heads of our member Churches.

### **4. Submission**

The issues the Inquiry is examining are taken very seriously by the member Churches of the NCCA, and we welcome the opportunity to make a submission.

(i) Our Christian belief is that respect for all human rights and recognition of their universality derives from the fact that we are all made in the divine image and cherished by God.

Genesis 1:27: "So God created humanity in God's own image, in the image of God God created them, male and female ....".

(ii) What follows from this is that there is no hierarchy of rights. Respect for one right, say religious freedom, implies respect for another, say freedom of expression.

(iii) Nor are one person's rights more important than another's.

The right of an Afghan to asylum is the same as the right of a person from El Salvador.

(iv) On the basis of humankind's religious and philosophic foundations, especially in the period since the horror of World War II, there has been a heightened endeavour to

strengthen the international legal framework to protect human rights and thus to prosper peace with justice.

The United Nations, with its 193 member States, has as its purpose the nurturing of the peace and security of all people, ensuring their human rights are fully protected in their civilised societies.

(v) Within the United Nations, the member States have developed the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commission which, amongst other things, exercises the Universal Periodic Review (UNUPR) to ensure UN Member States are fulfilling their human rights obligations and commitments.

The UNUPRs do highlight how far we still have to travel before the whole human family enjoys their full dignity, as is the divine purpose.

But the Reviews also highlight the agreed standards that we universally have adopted.

(vi) Attendance at, or the study of the outcomes of recent UNUPRs, does demonstrate that freedom of religion, as per the agreed standards, is deteriorating in many places.

These UNUPR Reports, with other research, reinforce how freedom of religion is closely connected with the right to freedom of expression, including media freedom.

In many countries, as reports demonstrate, a decision to change one's religion incurs persecution, imprisonment, violence and even death.

The member Churches of the NCCA make us painfully aware of the suffering caused by violations of religious freedom.

Our prayer and advocacy in recent months have been focused by terrorism against Coptic Christians in Egypt, Iraqi Christians, Pakistani Christians and Christians in various African States.

Moreover, we have been aware of dangerous trends and outbreaks of violence against Christians in India, China and many other places.

There are reports that demonstrate that the persecution of Christians, especially in places where they are a minority, is going from bad to worse.

These are matters of fact, not opinion.

At the same time, because of our call from Jesus to love our neighbour as ourself, and our recognition of the source of universal human rights in the divine purpose, we seek to wholeheartedly advocate for people of other faiths whose freedom of religion is attacked, including if this is even by so-called Christians.

Hence, the NCCA, through our member Churches, our aid and development agency Act for Peace, our Australian Churches' Refugee Taskforce, and otherwise, support, amongst other matters of peace and justice, freedom of religion for others. For example, recently this has involved advocacy on behalf of Rohingya Muslims, and Hindus in Pakistan, etc.

(vii) In this context, when we come to consider the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry, we must emphasise that, compared to very many other places, and significantly because

of the Judeo-Christian traditions and character of Australia, the human right to freedom of religion is in reasonable shape.

(viii) However, because of the global nature of communications in the digital age, trends in other places, as we know, soon influence us here.

We are seeing more abuse of people because of their religion, both verbal and physical.

This has been experienced, for example, by Christians who supported the “No” case in the recent Marriage Postal Vote just as it has been experienced by Muslims in the years since 9/11, for example. On the other side of both these examples, there are other victims of abuse.

(ix) Whilst the Panel may hear and endorse recommendations to strengthen the legal framework for religious freedom in Australia, that is not our expertise nor the area of our recommendations.

(x) Our recommendation to the Panel is as regards renewed education of the Australian community about human rights: how important their protection is to civilised living, how interconnected are all rights and how important is the role Australia can play as a model of a society flourishing, all our members living in peace with justice, our human rights protected by one another, without distinction.

The fractured global family needs such nations of hope, which we can be together! We recommend that the Government consult our Australian community on the possibility and benefits of a Bill for Human Rights based on the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

Relatedly, there is a concern about a growing level of religious ignorance in the Australian population as a whole. Can we review and then improve the way school curricula teach about the major religions of the world?

While not guaranteeing tolerance, better knowledge about basic beliefs, rituals and festivals of the major traditions may hopefully contribute to a more knowledgeable and respectful acceptance of religious freedom for all.

(xi) Our further recommendation is that our community leaders model courteous and respectful discourse in public life.

It is a matter of fact there is an irreducible link between what we think, say and then do.

Moreover, the pattern of our thinking, over time, shapes our character and our destiny. We do become what we think! Accordingly, traditions of contemplation and meditation help us better exercise self-awareness in what we think, say and do. As wisdom teaches us, we live with our minds our entire life, they go with us wherever we go. It is thus wise to fill our minds with worthwhile matters!

Self-awareness, with a moral intent to follow the Golden Rule and love ones neighbour as oneself, is the contribution religious people can make to the health of body, mind and spirit.

Christian meditation and the ‘Prayer of the Heart’ Jesus Prayer tradition in Orthodoxy are resources available to help us live freely together. <http://www.orthodoxprayer.org>

Those who cannot control what they think, say and do, with true moral intent, endanger us all.

(xii) Religious freedom therefore, involves a responsibility to critique one's own religion by its own highest standards of compassion for all.

All freedom comes with a responsibility to critique one's own exercise of this freedom against the rights and needs of others.

It is also sadly true that many of those suffering religious persecution do so at the hands of other religionists.

The distinction is important between religion as a “faith-journey”, open to the insights of others, open to critique and further illumination, compared to religion which is an “ideology” in which those with the power seek to impose their ideology on others, without compassionate respect.

As St Irenaeus once reflected: “God will always have more to teach us and we will always have more to learn.” That is the wisdom of a faith-journey, not of an ideology!

In today’s world the need is not so much for more dogmatic statements and acts. As Pope Francis recently said, “The task of the Church is to heal and warm the hearts of people.”

### Conclusion

Australia needs freedom of religion exercised responsibly and generously so we flourish even better together!

We should all embrace our opportunity to build a wonderful civilisation on our island. We can give hope to the world as to how humankind, in all our cultural and religious diversity, can blossom together by looking after each other’s human rights, so there is dignity and freedom for all. More education about these matters and more care with the way we think, speak and act will help us fulfil our destiny.

The key, as the fine scholar of religions Karen Armstrong conveys, is to live with compassion: that is, to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain and refuse, under any circumstances whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else.

<https://charterforcompassion.org/>

A compassionate world will be a peaceful world.

If this Inquiry can help us towards this outcome it will be a blessed moment in our Australian history, under the Southern Cross.



Bishop Philip Huggins  
President