



News

A betrayal of the faith

JOHN McINTYRE

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Christians should support equality and human rights laws, not seek exemptions.

IAM perplexed! On Sunday, The Age reported that Victorian Attorney-General Rob Hulls had, after extensive lobbying from conservative church leaders, pre-empted a parliamentary committee report on exemptions to the Equal Opportunity Act. Hulls announced a compromise that will allow church groups to continue to discriminate, albeit in a more limited way. This will, I imagine, also flow on to the national debate under way in regards to the introduction of a national **Human Rights Charter**.

Such a response is arguably at odds with the essence of what the founder of the Christian faith lived, taught and died for. How bizarre that the followers of Jesus Christ would oppose, and ask for exemptions from, a legal instrument that has at its heart a declaration of the dignity and value of every human life and the basic rights of every person. Jesus of all people, would champion an affirmation of fundamental human rights, which especially benefits marginalised groups in society and those least able to protect themselves.

But it is even more perplexing than that. In Victoria, the churches are arguing for the continued right to be exempted from obligations under the Equal Opportunity Act that would require them to uphold universally recognised human rights in matters of employment by church organisations.

Since it has been pointed out that this exemption is arguably in conflict with the already-established Victorian Charter of Human Rights, the churches are rushing to defend the privilege not to uphold a truth that lies at the very heart of the Christian understanding of the universal dignity of every human being. I have no concern that churches want to foster Christian caring organisations and learning communities. But why claim this can only be done if they are given exemption from a law, which like a Charter for Human Rights, is designed to affirm universal human rights?

It is good for Christians to engage in the debate about the values that characterise the society to which we belong. But we need to be clear that the grounds upon which we argue maintain the values for which we stand. Certainly, Christians living in more oppressive societies appreciate the value of a human **rights charter**, which, among other things, guarantees freedom of religion and freedom of speech and association. Australian Christians would do well to listen to their voices as we now discuss this matter within the life of our own nation.

But even more importantly for Christians, they should listen to the voice of Jesus. On the matter of the fundamental dignity of every human being, his story of the Good Samaritan is instructive. It is a narrative with radical implications. Told in the context of the conflicted multicultural society of Jesus' day, it is the story of a man who is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Two religious leaders from the same ethnic and socio-religious background as the victim pass him by and do nothing for him; perhaps out of fear, or even worse, perhaps because their religious sensibilities tell them not to touch one presumed to be dead. Eventually a Samaritan, a man belonging to the group most despised both by the victim and the ones who passed by, stops and cares for the beaten man, not counting either the risk or the cost to himself.

The shocking truth of this story is that the one considered most to be the enemy and least likely to know what is right and good proves to be the one who does what is right and good, even for a person from a group who despises him. This is a deliberately provocative and stark affirmation of the humanity of those most distant from us in every way. It tells the listeners that they only truly acknowledge the common humanity of every human being when they acknowledge that an ordinary member of the group most opposed to them is capable of doing what is right and good. This story asserts that when we see the other human being as one capable of goodness, we affirm the other person as truly human. This is even more potent than the other truth in the story: that whenever we see anyone in need, whoever they are, they deserve our help. At the heart of what Christians proclaim as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is this radical affirmation of universal human dignity as the basis of universal human rights.

How strange that today some of the heirs to the anti-slavery campaigner tradition of the church seem reluctant to support a Charter of Human Rights in Australia and seek ongoing exemption from the Equal Opportunity Act in Victoria. Those Christian social reformers who opposed slavery, such as William Wilberforce or Pope John Paul II, would surely be perplexed by this stance. If a radical statement of the full humanity of every person, simply because they are human, lies at the heart of Jesus' teaching and if he showed a particular concern for the marginalised and the most vulnerable, why then would Christians oppose a legal instrument designed to affirm these truths?

And furthermore, why would Christians defend their right to be exempt from a commitment to them when employing people to work in their church-based organisations? That is why I am perplexed.

John McIntyre is the Anglican Bishop of Gippsland and chairman of the Victorian Council of Christian Education.

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