Freedom of religion and belief under attack

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Many Australian Christians in recent years have sensed that the society around them has been transformed almost out of recognition. Values that their parents and grandparents took for granted are today openly derided. Marital fidelity and family values have diminished, at the same time as divorce and non-marital cohabitation have increased. The very institution of marriage has been called into question, with more and more Australian public figures each year calling for marriage to be redefined to include same-sex couples.

Even the concept of gender has been revolutionised. Prominent academics and commentators have derided the traditional biological categories of male and female as oppressive "hetero-normativity" and "binary reductionism", and called upon society to embrace the notion of so-called "gender fluidity". Facebook allows its users to identify from 58 gender options.[1]

Across the Western world, language has been altered to accommodate the new norms of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). In Spain, the terms mother and father have been replaced on birth certificates with Progenitor A and Progenitor B.[2] Recently, the British Medical Association has forbidden doctors from referring to pregnant women as "expectant mothers", because this might alienate transgender people. Instead, according to official guidelines issued by the BMA to its 160,000 members, mothers-to-be should be referred to as "pregnant people".[3]

It is the sheer speed at which these changes have come upon society that is so astonishing. Dr Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological College, writes:

"What makes the current moral and sexual revolution so different from previous moral revolutions is that it is taking place at an utterly unprecedented velocity. Previous generations experienced moral revolutions over decades, even centuries. This current revolution is happening at warp speed."[4]

The moral and sexual revolution that has swept the Western world has come at the cost of freedom of religion and belief. In Australia, as this paper will show, Christians from many walks of life have increasingly been subjected, on account of their beliefs, to lawsuits, business boycotts, loss of livelihood and curbs on their right to free speech and their exercise of conscience.

Faced with such adversity, many Christians may be tempted to despair. However, they should heed the Apostle Peter's warning to believers: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

Now is not the time to plead helplessness or concede ground to the enemy. It is vital, as in any battle or conflict, to maintain morale and to exercise the Christian virtue of hope. "Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances that we know to be desperate," G.K. Chesterton reminded believers. "Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all."

Targets of attacks

First and foremost, Christians must understand the nature of the broader conflict in which they find themselves. Below are listed seven principal areas in which Christians in Australia have suffered major setbacks in recent years.

1 Freedom of speech threatened

Until comparatively recently, Christians in the Western world could express their beliefs freely. However, that freedom can no longer be taken for granted.

For example, in November 2015, the Catholic Archbishop of Hobart, Julian Porteous, was brought before the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commission for producing and distributing in Catholic schools a booklet, *Don't Mess With Marriage*. This was a pastoral letter from the Australian Catholic bishops explaining to schoolchildren the traditional Catholic view on marriage. Even though the original complaint lodged against the booklet was eventually withdrawn in May 2016, the defendant Archbishop Porteous nonetheless had incurred by then considerable legal expenses.

On December 4, 2015, George Youssef, a preacher from Operation 513, a street evangelism team on Queensland's Gold Coast, was handcuffed, arrested and taken into custody for listing some sins named in the Bible. This occurred, even though the Operation 513 team had official authorisation and had preached often in that location. Almost a year later, Youssef was found not guilty by a magistrate and charges against him were dropped, although not before he had incurred heavy legal costs.[5]

2 Parental rights usurped

A major front in the culture wars – one which has pitted parents with traditional values against militant homosexual rights activists – was opened in 2014 with the federal government's launch of the controversial Safe Schools program.

The $8 million Safe Schools program, whose stated aim is to ensure that "gender and sexual diversity are supported and celebrated in all areas of the school community" across Australia, was launched in Melbourne on June 13, 2014. Attending the launch were Liberal Senator Scott Ryan (representing the then federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne, who was unable to attend); Labor Senator Penny Wong; the then Australian Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson; and Jason Ball, Australia's first openly homosexual AFL player, who was commissioned as the Safe Schools Coalition's first Ambassador.

Ostensibly, the program was supposed to be about combating bullying and preventing self-harm and suicide among students. However, the program's founder and author, Roz Ward, from La Trobe University's Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society, told the Melbourne 2015 Marxism Conference, that Safe Schools was part of a broader Marxist strategy to radically transform society, and especially to promote gender and sexual diversity.

She alleged that oppressive capitalists were responsible for upholding traditional values that restricted sexual freedom. She lamented:

"Apart from social stigma and discrimination, almost every single structure in society is set up to accommodate only

two possible genders, male or female. Everything from the toilets we use, the school uniforms, changing rooms, all official documents, passports, the processes that you go through [at] airports, everything is divided into these two limited gender options."[6]

The taxpayer-funded Safe Schools program has been criticised by religious groups for organising classroom activities in which 11-year-olds role-play gay teenagers. In one part of the program, dealing with transgenderism, the teaching manual says that students should be asked to discuss their genitalia and "what it would mean in terms of their gender if they were to lose that part of themselves".[7]

Queensland academic Dr Mervyn Bendle has expressed his astonishment at how such a radical left-wing program could have come to be promoted in schools across Australia. He wrote:

"… The ascension of Roz Ward … to the position of sexuality commissar for Australian schools is therefore an unforgivable indictment of federal and state governments. Her rise to power reflects very poorly on both Christopher Pyne and Simon Birmingham – two Liberal Party progressivists – under whose stewardship as federal ministers of education this destructive ideological juggernaut was smuggled into the national school curriculum."[8]

Very belatedly, in April this year the Safe Schools scheme was finally disowned by the Liberal governments of New South Wales and Tasmania. Even former PM Tony Abbott has recently turned against the scheme that his government had previously funded.

3 Independence of professionals undermined

During the past nine years, some state and territory governments have gravely undermined the independence and freedom of conscience of professionals, especially in healthcare.

For instance, the *Victorian Abortion Law Reform Act 2008*, section 8:1(b), obliges a doctor who has a conscientious objection to abortion, to "refer the woman to another registered health practitioner in the same regulated health profession who the practitioner knows does not have a conscientious objection to abortion".[9]

In 2013, Dr Mark Hobart, a Melbourne GP, was investigated by the Medical Board of Victoria, and his medical career threatened, after he had not only refused to accede to a couple's request for a gender-selective abortion, but declined to refer the pregnant mother to a non-objecting doctor to perform the abortion of a healthy 19-week unborn baby, simply because it was a girl.[10]

Melbourne-born Julian Savulescu, now an ethics professor at Oxford, has defended this controversial provision embodied in Victoria's abortion laws. He has urged that any doctor unwilling to arrange an abortion should be "punished through removal of licence to practise and other legal mechanisms". He has denounced conscientious objection as opening "a door to a Pandora's box of idiosyncratic, bigoted, discriminatory medicine", which, he argues, should have no place in modern medical practice.[11]

In June 2016, Canada legalised euthanasia for the terminally ill. In September of that year, Professor Savulescu argued that doctors should not be allowed to refuse, on moral grounds, to provide euthanasia to patients who requested it. He and a Canadian bioethicist, Udo Schuklenk, co-authored an article in the journal *Bioethics*, in which they wrote: "If patients meet the standards defined in the relevant legislation, they are entitled to access medical aid in dying, regardless of what a particular doctor thinks about their 'best interest'…. If this leads to feelings of guilty remorse or them dropping out of the profession, so be it."[12]

Canadian Alex Schadenberg, executive director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, has denounced Savulescu and Schuklenk's proposals. He says that conscience rights are not so much for doctors, although doctors have and need that protection, but "are designed for the patient".

"When I'm at my lowest time in my life, I don't want my doctor to be thinking, 'If I don't kill this guy or send him to someone who will kill him... [then] I'm going to lose my medical license,'" he explains. "I want my doctor to look me in the eye and say, 'I'm not going to do this…. I have the right to say 'No' to you. I will care for you, but I will not kill you.'"[13]

4 Autonomy of religious bodies threatened

The Equal Opportunity Act 2010, passed by the then Victorian Labor government, seriously violated religious freedom by forcing religious organisations, on the grounds of anti-discrimination, to employ people who did not necessarily share their values. In response, the organisation Free To Believe said:

"Hypocritically, politicians will be able to require that their employees are members of their political party, but ministers of religion will not be able to require that their employees are members of their own faith. Under the new Victorian Equal Opportunity Act, political parties will be automatically exempt from the new Act, but churches won't."[14]

When the Liberals and Nationals won the state election later that year, they rescinded the Act with its unreasonable employment test. But, in 2016, the Labor government, after returning to power, tried (albeit unsuccessfully) to re-introduce similar legislation.

5 Freedom of conscience a dead letter

Proponents of same-sex marriage often seek to reassure the public that changing Australia's Marriage Act will have little or no consequences for the average person. However, even Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has conceded, "Changing the definition of marriage affects every Australian. It affects not just LGBTI Australians; it affects everybody."[15]

Even in the absence of any changes to the Marriage Act, the campaign for same-sex marriage is already affecting many Australians. A number of large corporations have publicly pledged themselves to support the cause, regardless of the fact that many of their employees and customers may have different views on the matter.

Irish-born Qantas boss, Alan Joyce, himself homosexual and a supporter of redefining marriage, has defended this politicisation of the business community. Supporters of traditional marriage, he says bluntly, will have to put up or shut up. "If you're unhappy with a company that's involved with the campaign you won't be able to bank and you won't be able to fly anywhere," he said.[16]

Little or no tolerance is accorded to people who defend natural marriage, no matter how politely and respectfully these views are expressed.

In March this year, the Bible Society produced a video featuring two federal Liberal MPs, Andrew Hastie, a conservative Christian, and his colleague Tim Wilson, a homosexual, having a relaxed conversation over a Coopers beer about their opposing views on re-defining marriage.

Immediately, LGBTI activists denounced Coopers and called for a public boycott of its products. Coopers capitulated by cancelling its intended commemorative can design to mark the 200th anniversary of the Bible Society, and by pledging to join Marriage Equality Australia.[17]

A few days later, IBM Australia, which supports same-sex marriage, came under public attack from militant LGBTI activists because one of its senior executives, Mark Allaby, also sits on the board of an internship program for young Christians.[18]

In April, some of the country's largest corporations called on Australians to wear a specially designed "acceptance ring" as a visible endorsement of same-sex marriage. Qantas and Google Australia reportedly expect all their respective employees to wear one.

Marriage Alliance spokeswoman Sophie York, who is opposed to re-defining marriage, wondered whether employees who declined to wear the acceptance ring

would be called upon to explain their decision.

"Almost every day," Ms York told *The Australian*, "Marriage Alliance hears from an employee who has come under pressure at work to participate in an activity or donate funds to support the push to redefine marriage."[19]

To conscript people in this way to endorse a particular political view is a gross abuse of corporate power and violates Australia's traditions of political freedom and rights of conscience.

Long ago, this country pioneered the secret ballot, which has since been adopted by democracies around the world. The only way people can confidently express their genuine political views through the ballot box is if they can be assured that their vote is strictly private.

6 Violence and threats directed at Christians

In Australia, it is not only defenders of traditional marriage who are under incessant attack, but also defenders of the rights of the unborn. Sometimes the attacks have escalated into actual violence.

On October 12, 2013, between 80 and 100 pro-abortion activists launched a series of coordinated attacks on 3,000 pro-life marchers, during Melbourne's annual March for the Babies. Radical activists ripped banners and placards from pro-life marchers, pounded loud drums, screamed obscenities through loud-hailers and physically assaulted participants, including two members of parliament.[20]

In March 2016, two dozen rioting high school and university students invaded the Adelaide office of South Australian Senator Cory Bernardi, a vocal opponent of the government's Safe Schools program. Screaming protesters occupied his office, overturned tables and chairs, and scrawled abusive messages on the carpets and the outside walls. They threatened his wife and members of his staff, who were forced to barricade themselves in other rooms.[21]

On the Thursday evening before Christmas 2016, a van packed with six gas cylinders was parked next to the national head office of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) in Canberra. The gas cylinders exploded, causing extensive fire damage to the premises. A 35-year-old driver of the van, whom police to date have refused to identify, suffered burns and was admitted to hospital. Within 15 hours, ACT Policing peremptorily dismissed any suggestion that the explosion could have been "politically, religiously or ideologically motivated". However, this did little to reassure ACL managing director Lyle Shelton, whose organisation has long been targeted with death threats because of its defence of traditional marriage and its opposition to Safe Schools.[22]

7 Christians held responsible for suicides among SSA youth

Proponents of same-sex marriage have even gone so far as to hold their opponents as directly responsible for the incidence of suicide among same-sex attracted young people.

In 2015, journalist and academic Peter van Onselen asked a federal Coalition government minister, Bruce Billson, "Can you first just explain to me why it is an acceptable thing, the number of young Australians who are homosexual that will commit suicide between now and when the government finally gets its act together to have a plebiscite on this issue?"[23]

A similar refrain was taken up by federal Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten, when he announced last year his opposition to holding a national debate and plebiscite on marriage. He asserted that merely to allow defenders of traditional marriage the right to express their concerns could lead to suicide among same-sex attracted people, who would be adversely affected by "seeing the legitimacy of their identity debated on the national stage". He called upon parliament to introduce same-sex marriage "immediately", warning that any suicide would be "one too many".[24]

Dr van Onselen and Mr Shorten's call to prohibit any public discussion of moves to re-define marriage marks an extraordinary and unprecedented new phase in Australian public life. Opposition to same-sex marriage is thereby deemed to be an affront to humanity, even though such a view was, until only a few years ago, held by leading Labor identities such as former prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard and former attorney-general Nicola Roxon.

Good cop, bad cop strategy

Western churches and religious communities have been slow to recognise the sea-change in culture and sentiment that has created such hostility to Judeo-Christian norms. American philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig has warned:

"… The average Christian does not realize that there is an intellectual war going on in the universities and in the professional journals and scholarly societies. Christianity is being attacked from all sides as irrational or outmoded, and millions of students, our future generation of leaders, have absorbed this viewpoint. This is a war which we cannot afford to lose."[25]

This hostility towards Christian views, as we have seen, is especially evident in the public campaign to re-define marriage.

Supporters of same-sex marriage employ a dual approach, or "good cop, bad cop" strategy, to marginalise the Christian voice. The first of these is a gentle, seemingly non-confrontational approach, which employs therapeutic language full of talk about tolerance and affirming diversity, and about the need for respectful and inclusive dialogue.

However, beneath the public smiles and smooth words is the unspoken but none-too-subtle threat that one had better go along with the campaign for same-sex marriage, or else face unpleasant consequences, such as job loss and social ostracism. Thus, little by little, freedom of religion and conscience diminishes in Australia each year.

Even the gentler first approach, of seemingly welcoming respectful and inclusive dialogue, is not what it at first appears to be.

Take, for example, the aftermath of the narrow Senate defeat of the Turnbull government's promised marriage plebiscite scheduled for February this year. Labor and the Greens were adamant that the question should be resolved by parliament, not by plebiscite.

One prominent federal Liberal MP, former Australian Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson, has sought a political compromise on redefining marriage. In a lecture he delivered last November, entitled "Rediscovering humility: Religious freedom in a 21st century pluralist society",[26] he tried to persuade the two sides in the marriage debate to accommodate each other's concerns.

Religious communities, he said, should bow to the inevitable – that is, accept the legalisation of same-sex marriage – in return for being allowed to keep *some*, but by no means all, of the religious freedoms they have hitherto enjoyed in Australia.

Mr Wilson is convinced that marriage will eventually be re-defined to include same-sex relationships, but believes that the outcome will take one of two forms: a "soft landing" or a "hard landing". A "soft landing", he says, is one in which religious communities accept with good grace the legalisation of same-sex marriage, and try not to hold out for too many religious exemptions. A "hard landing", however, would result from "the pursuit of allowing the law to change and exempting bakers and florists from supplying goods and services to same-sex marriages". This, he said, "won't be accepted by parliament", and the Greens and Labor would be likely to impose a settlement with even fewer, if any, exemptions.[27]

Who would be chiefly responsible for such an adverse outcome? Mr Wilson asserts:

"The burden of its passage comes down to the way religious leaders and communities engage. If it is with humility, then religious freedom can win. Without it, a hard landing will likely be imposed in the not-too-distant future."[28]

In other words, Mr Wilson is saying that religious communities will have nobody but themselves to blame if Australia ends up with same-sex marriage and zero religious exemptions.

Mr Wilson, who describes himself as "gay and agnostic",[29] calls on Christians to heed the teachings of Saint Augustine of Hippo and pursue their aims with humility.[30] He does not, however, give similar counsel to militant same-sex marriage activists to act humbly and refrain from harassing, and taking out lawsuits against, supporters of traditional marriage.

Five years ago, Robert P. George, a professor of jurisprudence at Princeton University, described how religious liberties in the United States have been seriously curtailed in recent years, despite the public constantly being reassured that the redefinition of marriage "would have no impact on persons and institutions that hold to the traditional view of marriage". He wrote:

"No one, they assured us, would require Catholic or other foster care and adoption services to place children in same-sex headed households. No one, they said, would require religiously affiliated schools and social-service agencies to treat same-sex partners as spouses, or impose penalties or disabilities on those that dissent. No one would be fired from his or her job (or suffer employment discrimination) for voicing support for conjugal marriage or criticizing same-sex sexual conduct and relationships."[31]



We must oppose threats to freedom of religion in word and deed

He warned defenders of traditional marriage against being naïve about political realities:

"The fundamental error made by some supporters of conjugal marriage was and is, I believe, to imagine that a grand bargain could be struck with their opponents: 'We will accept the legal redefinition of marriage; you will respect our right to act on our consciences without penalty, discrimination, or civil disabilities of any type. Same-sex partners will get marriage licenses, but no one will be forced for any reason to recognize those marriages or suffer discrimination or disabilities for declining to recognize them.' *There was never any hope of such a bargain being accepted.*"[32] [Emphasis is Robert George's].

What is to be done?

Earlier in this paper we discussed the need for Christians, when faced with adversity, never to succumb to despair but to maintain morale and to exercise the Christian virtue of hope. Another virtue they need to exercise is courage.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), the famous Dutch Reformed theologian and statesman, famously declared: "When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin. You must, at the price of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith."

First and foremost, Christians need to become like "the sons of Issachar", who, the Bible tells us, "understood the times and knew what to do" (1 Chronicles 12:32). Believers will certainly not understand their times if they outsource their thinking to the Twittersphere and Google or rely for their information on the mainstream media, which seldom if ever provides balanced coverage of issues to do with family and religious values.

It is vital therefore for Christians to look to more truthful and reliable sources of news and opinion, such as pro-life, pro-family and Christian journals, newsletters and websites.

Secondly, the growing threats to freedom of religion and belief need to be countered urgently, through believers keeping abreast of political developments, being willing to speak to their members of parliament, and being prepared to stand up for their rights. Christians should avail themselves of all the resources a democracy provides for enabling citizens to make their voices heard. They should write letters to newspapers, phone talkback radio, and call on their local members of parliament, to express their concerns.

At election time, they should not meekly follow the how-to-vote cards issued by the major parties, but should do their own homework on the backgrounds of the various candidates, and discover which, if any, of them hold Christian values. FamilyVoice Australia publishes indispensible candidate surveys and guides, in the lead-up to federal and state elections, to help one make a sound choice.

Thirdly, it is not enough for Christians to respond to bad laws which threaten freedom of religion and belief by pleading for the odd exception or exemption. Instead, they should be more assertive in demanding to keep 100 per cent of the religious liberties Australians have hitherto enjoyed, and never to settle for the second best.

About the author

John Ballantyne is a Melbourne-based writer. In 2003 he was president of the Family Council of South Australia. From 2004 to 2015 he was editor of *News Weekly*.

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