

“Death by a thousand cuts – the new mode of martyrdom”

**Speech given by Bishop Peter Ingham at
“Concern for our Religious Freedoms” Seminar**

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You have already been welcomed to our gathering – I thank you for coming. It’s my job to open the batting and as King Henry VIII said to each of his six wives, “I won’t keep you too long!”

In Australia, it seems true to say that we enjoy a tolerance that values difference and diversity. We believe popularly in giving everyone a “fair go!”

Like you, I try to read and hear the news critically so I’ll know what’s going on and make my own assessment about what I hear and see. However, I detect that our tolerant Aussie acceptance of where the other person is coming from, is being more than somewhat threatened.

You have heard of the author, Richard Dawkins, who was recently given a lot of publicity when he visited Australia to address the atheists’ convention in Melbourne. Jewish author, Melanie Phillips, writing in *The Australian* on 16 March 2010, called Richard Dawkins, “the high priest of belief in unbelief” and she said “Dawkins has made a career out of telling everyone how much more tolerant the world would be, if only religion were obliterated out of human psyche.” Furthermore she states, “Dawkins showed himself remarkably intolerant towards anyone who disagrees with him. When Dawkins claims religion is responsible for all the ills in the world, he conveniently overlooks the atheistic creeds behind the reign of terror after the French Revolution, the anti-religion dictatorship of both the Nazis and of the Communists.”

Good atheists who present their arguments soundly and respectfully are quite ‘embarrassed’ by Dawkins’ methods of ridicule and intolerance, his bullying approach which shouts over the top of, rather than enters into dialogue with people of differing viewpoints.

A major target of today’s growing intolerance seems to be people’s religious beliefs and their freedom to hold what they believe in conscience to be true and good, whether they be Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu or of no religion. We are facing the ominous doctrine which attempts to build a society with no regard whatsoever for religion and which seeks to destroy the religious freedom of its citizens – an ideology hostile to the Christian faith.

That's why, I believe, it is timely and it's vital that we people of goodwill defend our religious freedoms and be alert to what is subtly going on in our society. Well-known media people like Mike Carlton and Peter Fitzsimons have publicly proclaimed their atheism in print. It has become fashionable to be dismissive of all religion particularly Christianity. This arrogant dismissiveness could be quite aptly described as the new modern method of martyrdom.

People of faith were once upon a time fed to the lions, decapitated, crucified and the like. We instead find ourselves today subjected to death by 1000 cuts with the new mode of martyrdom coming in the form of ridicule, derision and character assassination, as opposed to being silenced through physical death. The torture of believers is to be found in the constant attempts to have them relegated to the sidelines, unable to contribute to the morals, laws and structures that make up the fabric of society without significant criticism.

The new mode of martyrdom is not as bloody as forms of old, but its aim is ultimately the same and its methods no less cruel. We have all noted the nonsense about attempts to outlaw public nativity scenes because they may offend non-Christian religions; or not allowing children to sing Christmas carols in government schools for the same reason. Other faiths aren't offended, but secularists and atheists are. If we as Christians respect the celebrations of Ramadan, Passover, Diwali, Feast of Vesakh, people of other faiths will in turn respect Christmas and Easter.

What is Religious Freedom?

Australian citizens hold a variety of beliefs about the purpose and meaning of life. In a pluralist society, certain fundamental principles to which everybody can subscribe are vitally important for the common good of all of us.

I list those fundamental principles as first, *freedom of speech*; second, *freedom of assembly*; and third *freedom to hold and express particular religious beliefs*.

How often do you hear people say that we should avoid discussing religion or politics? No doubt, the reason for this is because people hold these values so dearly and as a result they can easily become impassioned and volatile about them.

In the course of history, it can be seen how these three basic freedoms mentioned are curtailed as soon as totalitarian dictatorships or regimes take power. It happened with Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Apartheid South Africa, North Korea, South Vietnam after 1975. The regime headed up by Mugabe in Zimbabwe is another current example.

When legislation curtails the first of these, *freedom of speech*, it militates against the freedom of the press and stops the media doing its job of communicating information; when legislation prevents the second, *freedom of assembly*, it stops public rallies being held to express discontent (remember Tiananmen Square), and

thirdly when churches and religious faiths are outlawed, dictatorships aim to stop moral and conscientious objection to what a ruling regime is doing.

The reality and powerful influence of religious freedom was demonstrated by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley in South Africa over apartheid; another example was Christians led by Cardinal Jaime Sin against the Marcos regime in the Philippines, and the long list of martyrs like Fr Jerzy Popolusco in Poland, Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary, the Anglican and Catholic Martyrs of Uganda between 1885 and 1887, Oscar Romero in San Salvador (shot dead at the altar 30 years ago today), and Archbishop Francis Xavier van Thuan in Vietnam (13 years in prison and 9 years in solitary confinement and on release banished from his native country), just to mention a few.

The claims you and I make to be free to practise our religion in a democratic society must be respected and permitted to be exercised, unless justice and public order are threatened.

Jesuit lawyer, Fr Frank Brennan, said in a recent lecture, “How can we ever hope to live in a truly democratic society when secularists maintain their demand that people with a religious perspective not be able to claim a right to engage in the public square agitating about laws on issues such as voluntary euthanasia, same-sex unions, abortion and discrimination in employment? We have just as much right as our secularist fellow citizens to contribute in the public square informed and animated by our world view and religious tradition. We acknowledge that it would be prudent to put our case in terms comprehensible to those who do not share that world view or religious tradition when we are wanting to win the support and acceptance of others, especially if we be in the minority. But there is no requirement of public life that we engage only on secularist terms. And we definitely insist on the protection of our rights including the right to religious freedom even if it not be a right highly prized by the secularists!” (*Fr Frank Brennan SJ AO; 8/2/2010 McCosker Oration*)

An essential part of our Christian tradition is committed to promoting human dignity because we are all made in the image and likeness of God. This ensures that our basic human rights are respected.

The freedom to hold and express our religious beliefs is a paramount right. The United Nations has made various declarations on the right to freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion published in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its 1960 Convention against discrimination in education, and in 1966 via: (1) *The International Convention Economic, Cultural and Social Rights*; (2) *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*; and (3) *The International Convention on the Elimination of all All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. The UN 1981 *Declaration on the Elimination of All forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religious Belief*, attempts to define certain protections for religious freedom so as to protect individuals and religious groups from undue intrusion by the State or by any other body into the ethos, principles and conduct of religious practice.

While these UN Declarations can only ever be general points of reference for us here in Australia, international law is a very legitimate and important influence.

Our Australian Constitution stops the Commonwealth from making any law “to establish any religion”, “to impose any religious observance”, or “to prohibit the free exercise of any religion.” (Section 116 Australian Constitution)

Two Commonwealth Statutes relevant to religious freedom are the Sex Discrimination Act (1984) and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act (1986).

The 1984 Sex Discrimination Act (Section 37) exempts institutions such as Ministry Training Institutions, so they may operate in accordance with the tenets and beliefs of the particular faith and permits the conduct of schools in accordance with the religious traditions and tenets of the particular faith.

The 1986 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Act (Section 3) exempts us on the grounds of the inherent faith requirements for a position of employment or that the employment of a staff person will not injure the religious susceptibilities of adherents to that faith. So we can legitimately say we don't want an atheist teaching religious education in a Christian school.

What we are now witnessing are accumulating pressures on our religious freedom in areas such as education, healthcare, family life and social services. These pressures seek to erode the exemptions already available to us or they narrow the rights of religious bodies to employ appropriate personnel by seeking to define what are called ‘core’ and ‘non-core’ religious activities, so as to impose unjust limitations on the freedom of religious communities to act in accordance with their beliefs. For example, to say that only the religion teacher has a religious activity in a Catholic School is not true. Secular bodies are not competent to determine what does or does not constitute religious practice.

Such constant subtle attempts by the enemies of religion are slowly working against the religious freedom already provided by legislation because they attempt to narrow the interpretation of current legislative provisions. This can impose unjust limitations on the freedom of religious communities to act in accordance with their beliefs.

Religious beliefs have social relevance for the common good of the whole community. Religion is not a purely private and personal matter. Christian Churches through their educational institutions, their cultural pursuits, through their social welfare and charitable organisations- Anglicare, CatholicCare, Uniting Care, St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army, hospitals and nursing homes- put their faith into action after the mandate and example of Jesus Christ and they reach out to anyone of any nationality or religious persuasion in need.

In our own society and indeed worldwide, no organisation, no government or even the united efforts of governments as found in the United Nations, comes close to

providing as many human or material resources as religions do to support the world's most needy and vulnerable. In Australian Society, people of faith are at least seven times more likely to be voluntarily involved in social justice or welfare activities. You would surely think that the beliefs that lead religious people to these overt responses of involvement in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable, could only be regarded as wonderful and positive, something worth protecting. Nevertheless, the mantra describing these beliefs as backward and deluded are growing, and are getting plenty of prominent space in mainstream media.

In contrast, the individualism and materialism that accompanies secularism and atheism does not have as a by product, the widespread outpouring of solidarity with our world's most marginalised. Pardon the pun, butGod help the most vulnerable if the atheists were ever to come to dominate in the thinking of our western society..... I would suggest that the principle of the 'survival of the fittest' would truly find its home in such a society.

Reaching out is how we give expression to our religious purposes and beliefs defending and helping the marginalised and the vulnerable and protecting and strengthening the vital institutions of civil society beginning with the family, upholding marriage as the conjugal union of husband and wife, teaching the truth about the nature of human life from its first beginning to its natural end and protecting human dignity.

Justice and the common good are not just Judeo-Christian ideals. They are of concern to all citizens and are the basis of the well-being of our society.

Attempts to redefine marriage and to change traditional understandings about the sacredness of human life are assaults by powerful secular forces in our society on truths that cannot be abandoned or compromised without seriously weakening our social framework.

We are called as Christians to live, profess and develop our faith tradition in a social milieu that is often hostile to any religious perspective on life.

The critics of religion and religious people are increasingly, deliberately and quite incessantly endeavouring to paint a picture of people of faith as backward, superstitious, unlearned, and easily duped. I would suggest to them that they need to embrace authentically their own 'scientific method' in this regard, as the weight of evidence shows that people of faith on average are well-educated, intelligent, successful people. In the main they 'outscore' their agnostic and atheistic contemporaries in this regard. So let's not fall too easily into believing that people of faith are easily deluded, as the weight of both history and contemporary society shows that people of faith have in their ranks many of the greatest minds and intellects that have ever lived.

This pedigree of intellect amongst believers is not dwindling and today counts amongst its numbers, a significant proportion of the world's leading scientists. Many of those leading minds, rather than believing that religion and science are

opposing forces argue strongly that Religion and Science are nearing ever greater points of intersection as humanity comes to understand more about life and the universe at both its most microscopic and infinite levels.

As Fr Frank Brennan points out, all citizens “need to concede that there are experienced, intelligent people of a religious disposition in our community, just as there are experienced, intelligent people who have no need or the desire for the religious sentiment. That’s (the very point) why religious freedom is so important.”
(Fr Frank Brennan SJ, McCosker Oration)

My final point here is that, rather than calling for people of faith to remain silent or remove themselves from the realm of public policy and debate, their opinions and contribution should be eagerly sought. The weight of evidence would suggest that they might just have a little bit of wisdom to contribute to public debate. It is for this reason as much as any other, that upholding and securing religious freedom is so vital for society as a whole, not just for believers.

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