

6th January 2022

Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee
Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Regarding the Religious Discrimination Bill
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Committee,

We thank you for considering the submission of Sydney Atheists in regard to the Religious Discrimination Bill.

About Sydney Atheists

Sydney Atheists is a not for profit social and educational group. Among our activities, we provide a sanctuary for people who have fallen out of belief from various religions. People who have left religious belief have been vilified and persecuted in many ways including social exclusion, family separation, financial blackmail, emotional torment and physical beatings.

Religions vary widely

Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism have hundreds, if not thousands of subgroups or versions within their broader churches. Within even those groups there exist various levels of orthodoxy and adherence. Each one claims to be the one true religion, or the correct and uniquely approved religion as certified by their god or gods. This belief is, of course, impossible. They cannot all be correct.

Cults

The religious Discrimination Bill would empower and give free rein to, as well as protect religious cults from, investigation. It will protect religious extremism.

Religious belief is fluid

Membership of any religious group can be dynamic, with degrees of religiosity and adherence varying greatly in people's lifetimes. Many people change their religions altogether.

Unlike racial types, religious views, opinions and beliefs are as inconsistent as political views, opinions and beliefs. They can be as inconsistent as views, opinions

and beliefs on many other topics and areas of interest. Some people believe that the earth is flat, some believe that vaccinations do harm, some people believe in conspiracy theories. These people and many others continue in their beliefs despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. But beliefs can and do change.

Protection

In this regard, Sydney Atheists are of the opinion that religious belief should be offered no more or less protection than any other views, opinions or beliefs.

We do not consider that the Religious Discrimination Bill provides protection against discrimination and hurtful statements to those who have lesser, different or no religious beliefs, by people and bodies which do have particular religious beliefs. There are insufficient safeguards and definitions for the terms 'reasonable person', 'reasonable circumstances', 'proportionate', and 'made in good faith'. This results in a very high threshold for offensive and vilifying religious statements (which include proselytizing and evangelism) to be considered unlawful. We consider that 'moderately expressed religious view' implies that if an offensive, malicious and/or vilifying statement of religious belief is made in a polite tone of voice, it is acceptable and lawful, which we do not agree with.

We do not consider the Religious Discrimination Bill provides safeguards for effective medical care, that may be withheld on the basis of religious beliefs of the provider.

We do not believe the Religious Discrimination Bill safeguards the education system for staff and students who have lesser, different or no religious beliefs, or for staff and students who have lifestyles that deviate from the religious beliefs of education providers.

We do not believe the Religious Discrimination Bill safeguards employment for employees who have lesser, different or no religious beliefs compared to their employer.

We consider that the intentions of statements of religious beliefs are not important and that the perceptions and the outcomes of the statements of religious beliefs on recipients is what is pertinent.

We proffer that the Religious Discrimination Bill will empower religions, religious institutions and religious individuals to discriminate against, humiliate, marginalise and harm people who are less religious, vary in their religious doctrines, are from other religions or have no religion.

Dismissal

Sydney Atheists encourage the Australian parliament to dismiss the Religious Discrimination Bill

Steve Marton
On behalf of Sydney Atheists