

PM GLYNN  
INSTITUTE

A new  
perspective

10  
principles  
of religious  
freedom



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# Religious freedom: the starting point

Australians live in a very secular society, but religious questions just will not go away. They are at the centre of many of the most important and contentious issues of the day, including arguments over love and sexuality, life and death, dignity and identity, and justice and human rights. Religion crops up again and again in discussions about education, health care, social services, child protection, social justice, discrimination, multiculturalism, immigration and social cohesion. Increasingly, the role of religion in these issues – and in our society – revolves around another big question: the question of religious freedom.

Understanding what religious freedom is and isn't is essential if we want to have better conversations about how we disagree and how we live together. It starts with taking religious belief seriously, even if we

completely disagree with it. We do this when we treat religious belief not just as some sort of personal opinion but as a deep conviction about ultimate reality; as a form of knowledge about the truth of the human condition, of our nature, the world we live in, and how we should live. It is for this reason that religion so powerfully influences the lives of believers, the actions they take, and the shape of communities.

The 10 principles of religious freedom set out here are not intended to be the answer to every question on the subject. They are not a formula to apply in solving particular problems. Instead, they are a way of clarifying both the foundations and the scope of religious freedom, and why it is so important both to individuals and to a good society.

Cover picture: Chalice, mid-17th century, sterling silver gilt 15.3cm (H), Australian Catholic University Art Collection.

Overleaf: John Coburn, *Festive tree of life* 1998 (detail).  
Colour lithograph.  
Australian Catholic University Art Collection





# What is religious freedom?

## 1. IT BELONGS TO EVERYONE

Freedom of religion and belief is a universal human right because looking for answers to questions of meaning and value in something greater than ourselves is part of who we are. Many religious people look to God, but non-religious people too draw on ideas such as human dignity, justice, freedom, equality, and the environment as sources of supreme meaning. We seek the truth, revere it when we find it, and live our lives according to it. In this sense, questions of meaning and value are religious questions, even when our answers are not.

## 2. IT RESPECTS FREEDOM

Religious freedom is based on respect for individual freedom. It is the right to believe or not to believe, to adopt, reject or change beliefs as we decide for ourselves. It protects freedom by protecting people from having the beliefs of others – religious, secular or political – imposed on them. While religious belief has often been coerced in history, this contradicts the nature of religious faith. Our deepest convictions about reality and meaning have to be our own, freely thought and freely embraced. Religious belief must always be proposed, never imposed.

## 3. IT PROTECTS PEOPLE

Religious freedom protects human dignity by protecting people who think, believe, worship and live differently. It helps people to resist pressure to hide their beliefs or self-censor, or to limit their participation in society to avoid bullying or intimidation. It defends them against discrimination,

exclusion or punishment because of their beliefs. Religious freedom is especially important in protecting people whose beliefs or ideas others find strange, ridiculous or even offensive, and particularly communities which may be hated and feared because of their beliefs.

## 4. IT RESPECTS THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS

Religious freedom should be exercised in solidarity with other people. It is not an absolute. It is limited by respect for the rights of others and the common good. Because our sense of autonomy is often stronger than our sense of the common good, agreeing on the limits of rights can be difficult. Wherever possible we should try to resolve these tensions with mutual respect – not suspicion – and with generosity towards beliefs and ways of life we do not share or even oppose. Restrictions on religious freedom should be made only on the basis of principles which apply to everyone, religious or not.

## 5. IT IS ABOUT MORE THAN WORSHIP

Religious freedom is more than freedom of worship or a right to tolerance. The persecution of religious groups in different parts of the world shows how important these basic protections are, but religious freedom does not end there. It is a much larger freedom which makes it possible for individuals and faith communities to witness to their beliefs with integrity and as full members of society, not only in worship but in professional life, public life and service to the wider community.

## **6. IT IS NOT JUST PRIVATE**

Religious freedom allows individuals to practise their religion freely and publicly as citizens, and not just in private life. The claim that religious people should quarantine their beliefs from public debate and even from the way they carry out their profession or occupation is unfair and discriminatory, because it allows everyone except religious people to act on their beliefs. No human being lives in neatly divided public and private worlds. Beliefs about meaning and truth, right and wrong – religious and non-religious alike – are conclusions about what is real and important in life. For everyone, they serve as a basis for action in the world.

## **7. IT HELPS PEOPLE IN NEED**

Religious freedom means people are entitled to live out their beliefs in the way they serve the rest of the community. Coming together around a common purpose and shared beliefs to help those in need is one of the main ways in which religious communities encourage participation in society and work to build up a sense of solidarity. Religious freedom protects not only the right of people to live out their beliefs in co-operation with others who share their faith, but also the right to establish and operate services for the wider community that are faithful to the beliefs which inspired them, and which reflect those beliefs in their services.

## **8. IT IS A BASIC FORM OF FAIRNESS**

Religious freedom is not a claim for special treatment. It is a basic fairness for people to be able to put their beliefs into practice and not to be forced to act against them. Religious freedom protects this basic fairness. It is not a claim for a special privilege or an exemption for religious

communities from laws which apply to everyone else. Describing it in these terms is misleading. Religious freedom is a fundamental right which ensures there is a space for religious communities to live out their beliefs, while also respecting the dignity and freedom of other people.

## **9. IT REINFORCES HUMAN RIGHTS**

Religious freedom reinforces other fundamental rights because it is part of a larger whole. It does not sit in isolation but is an integrated and essential part of human rights. Because these rights protect the different things we need to make a full life possible, they have to go together and they should not be placed in opposition to each other. Freedom of religion both depends on respect for rights such as freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, and supports and reinforces them in turn. Placing religious freedom in doubt places these other rights in doubt as well.

## **10. IT GIVES PEOPLE VOICE**

Religious freedom makes democratic societies stronger. It protects not only the right of individuals and religious communities to participate fully in democracy, but also the contribution they make to building it up. Because religious freedom and related protections such as conscientious objection protect people from being compelled to co-operate with activities which they hold, as a matter of conviction, to be wrong, they also help to encourage people to speak out against injustice and evil when no one else will. Good societies need these voices.

# About the PM Glynn Institute

The PM Glynn Institute is committed to public policy for the common good.

It was established by Australian Catholic University in early 2016 to provide the Catholic community with a standing capacity to analyse public policy issues of concern not only to the Catholic Church and its services, but to the wider Australian community as well.

The Institute's work is shaped by the proposition that understanding the contemporary world also means considering religion and the foundations of faith as important and enduring features of the social and political landscape, both in Australia and globally.

Its role is to generate new approaches and new thinking on public policy issues, and to develop well-supported and practical proposals to address them.

## CHALICE OF LIBERTY

PROTECTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
IN AUSTRALIA



FRANK BRENNAN - M.A. CASEY - GREG CRAVEN

The 10 principles of religious freedom are taken from *Chalice of Liberty: Protecting Religious Freedom in Australia* (Kapunda Press). The book explains why freedom of religion remains so important for the way of life enjoyed in a secular liberal democracy like Australia, and how it might be better protected.

“the gift of humanity is to possess something as precious as life itself ... . That precious gift – dignity – is at the heart of this important book”.

Edward Santow, Human Rights Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission

# Religious freedom in 10 points

## Religious freedom is about...

- 1. universality:** it belongs to everyone
- 2. freedom:** it respects freedom
- 3. dignity:** it protects people
- 4. solidarity:** it respects the rights of others
- 5. witness:** it is about more than worship
- 6. integrity:** it is not just private
- 7. service:** it helps people in need
- 8. equality:** it is a basic form of fairness
- 9. justice:** it reinforces human rights
- 10. democracy:** it gives people voice

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