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FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND FREEDOM FROM RELIGION



Freedom of Religion

Freedom of religion is one of the basic human rights. It has featured in the history of various Christian denominations, it was one of the four basic “freedoms” identified by President Roosevelt at the beginning of World War II, and it is a right listed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



Freedom from Religion

However, in recent years there has been a move away from “freedom of religion” to “freedom from religion”. In other words, in developed Western countries, there is an explicit attempt to downgrade and marginalize all religious activities, with particular emphasis given to reducing the influence of Christianity. Religion cannot be banned because that would be a blatant contravention of international law. Instead, religion is being pushed to the margins.

The US is the location for the biggest disputes. For example, in June 2000 the US Supreme Court said that the reading of a prayer before a high school football match was against the US Constitution, which decrees a separation of church and state. Such an act had “the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship”.

The movement towards freedom from religion is very subtle and those involved would probably deny any conscious effort in doing so; it is just a progression of small incremental steps. Here are some examples:

- . The proposed amendment to the 1977 NSW Anti-Discrimination ACT, so as to make possible for the first time allegations of discrimination on the grounds of religion.
- . The Commonwealth Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission enquiry into “Religious Values in Employment” (as a result of allegations made about discrimination in the employment of staff in church-based labour market programmes) and, most recently, the creation of Draft Guidelines to guide such programmes in the future.

. The redefinition of “family” by stealth via court cases (such as the Federal Court IVF case in Victoria) and pieces of legislation which are not specifically charged with redefining the family (such as the NSW Carers’ Responsibilities Bill, 2000).

✓ Implications

First, the movement towards freedom from religion is very subtle. The changes are being made often without much debate and without people recognizing the significance of the incremental changes.

Second, the changes are occurring in a variety of ways and so it is possible that no one organization is fully aware of all the subtle changes.

Third, the movement by some sections of governments erode what appeals to other parts of governments in the quality of welfare and other services that churches can provide, namely, the integrity, high moral values and dedication. Governments have been “contracting out” an increasing range of their services to churches. Now other parts of those same governments are trying to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Finally, the movement towards freedom from religion will make it more difficult for churches to uphold their core values. In due course, they could become just like other secular welfare organizations. In which case, what would make them different from those other organizations?

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