

## All of Life

*Christianity belongs in the public square – and everywhere else*

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Published in the August 2009 edition of *Australian Presbyterian*

Any AP reader that strays into the 'letters to the editor' page of the nation's broadsheets or roams the blogosphere is all too aware that our secularist opponents would have all Christians, actually persons of any religious faith, but especially Christians, driven from the public square and locked up behind Church doors.

At the current time in Victoria, already alluded to in the article *Here we stand* in the May 2009 edition of AP, there is a review being undertaken by a Committee of the Parliament of Victoria into the exceptions and exemptions in the *Equal Opportunity Act 1995* that permit faith based institutions to discriminate in their employment policies. There are powerful forces which seek to remove these freedoms from faith based institutions. An options paper has been produced which recommends curtailment of the exception clauses in the *Act*, on the basis that a distinction can be drawn between "internal" and "external" aspects of freedom of religion.

The options paper takes the view that core 'internal' aspects of freedom of religion are worthy of protection, namely religious adherents should be free to adopt a religion and set of religious beliefs, but that 'external' aspects of freedom of religion, namely the manifestation of those beliefs, should be subject to regulation by the State, which may restrict the freedom of religious adherents to live according to those principles.

This distinction becomes a convenient ploy, by way of example, to reject a faith requirement for teachers and other staff at a school expressly set up according to Christian principles and catering to the preferences of Christian parents.

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria, in its submission to this review, asserted that it must be understood that there is no public/private distinction in Christian teaching. Christianity is all of life: once a person embraces the Christian religion, this has implications for the whole of that person's life. This is premised on the fact that God is the maker and Lord of everything, and as our Lord, we are bound to live our whole lives to His glory: "*whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

No one expressed this attitude better than the Dutch pastor, professor, educator, newspaper editor and party political leader, Abraham Kuyper, founder of the Free University and Prime Minister of Holland from 1901 to 1905, who famously said:

*"There is not a single square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not cry, 'Mine!'"*

Christian teaching extends to every aspect of our lives, and lays down specific rules which govern family relationships, church relationships, relationships between employers and employees, behaviour in the public sphere, etc. Thus there is a distinctively Christian way for Christian employers to behave towards their employees, and likewise for the way in which Christian employees go about their work.

Accordingly, true freedom of religion requires that we have the freedom to manifest our religion in public as well as private. To deny Christians the right to manifest our religious beliefs externally is essentially to deny freedom of religion to Christians.

There were two points we made in our submission:

1. Our religion requires us to engage in public works in a manner consistent with Christian teaching – we bring Christ with us into the public realm. Our Christian profession is therefore not confined to private life, but pervades all of our lives, both private and public.
2. This involvement in public life has been part of the Christian tradition for the past 2,000 years.

### **The Foundational Principle**

The foundational Christian principle by which individuals relate to each other is the golden rule: *“whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them”* (Matthew 7:12). Rather than enforcing one’s rights, we should be prepared even to sacrifice our rights for the sake of others: *“if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”* (Matthew 5:39). Thus the Apostle Paul gives the following direction:

*“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others”*. (Philippians 2:3-4).

The imperative concern for neighbour is reinforced for the Christian by the linking of the command to care for the neighbour with the command to love and serve God, with the clear implication that this shall be for every compartment of life, whether private or public. Thus, Jesus summarised the Old Testament law in this fashion, making it binding on his followers,

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*

*The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”* Mark 12:30,31

We therefore affirm that looking out for the interests of others must most certainly include every appropriate effort to stand up for those who suffer specific injustices, especially at the hands of the more powerful.

The Old Testament prophet Micah expresses this truth in the following way,

*“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8)

### **Practical Expression**

This foundational principle to do good to others and meet their needs is expressed in numerous practical ways, including:

- Performing acts of mercy and charity;
- Speaking out on public issues;

- Establishing schools, hospitals, aged care facilities, welfare organisations, chaplaincy and prison ministries.

Historically, from the earliest days of the Church, Christians cared for their fellow citizens. The noted sociologist Rodney Stark, in reviewing the historical evidence for the growth of the Church to a position of pre-eminence in the ancient world by the 4th century, concluded that it was due in large measure to the care of the Christians for their own as well as for their pagan neighbours during the devastating plagues of the second and third centuries AD. Whereas the pagans fled from the cities and towns leaving the sick behind, the Christians remained and cared for the sick, in this way demonstrating both love of God and love of neighbour. The Emperor Julian (known as Julian the Apostate) said, “atheism (i.e. Christian faith!) has been especially advanced through the loving service rendered the stranger and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well, while those that belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them”.

This has been the pattern ever since, and even now continues despite the rise of the modern state. The Church has always been to the forefront of education and the provision of health and welfare services. It is as true in Africa and all those other former colonies of Christianised European countries as it is in Australia.

The fact that Church and other faith based institutions continue to exist and expand despite the additional cost to parents in the case of schools bears eloquent testimony to the value placed on these institutions with their clearly defined religious foundation by parents, clients, patients and residents.

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria traces its lineage back to the Reformation of the 16th century and especially to the Genevan Reformer, John Calvin. The culture of Scotland and Holland in particular was profoundly influenced by Calvin, but also that of England and America, the latter through the Pilgrim Fathers. Henry van Til writes,

*Calvin saw the church and state as two independent entities, each having received its own authority from the sovereign God. In this conception the state is never secular.*

*According to Calvin, church and state must live at peace and must cooperate together in subjection to the Word of God. Each is to have its own jurisdiction. The state has authority in purely civil and temporal matters; the church in spiritual matters.*

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 includes a chapter (Chapter 23) on the role of the “civil magistrate”. This chapter makes clear that the role of civil government has been established by God “for his own glory and the public good” and further that it is “lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto: in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth.”

That is, in discharging public office, or performing public services, Christians are to do so in accordance with Christian principles and teaching.

The way in which the Calvinistic reformation percolated through all spheres of life in Scotland is seen in matters as diverse as the practice of establishing schools for the education of all children alongside the village Kirk; the role of church elders in promoting morality; and the promulgation of town mottos such as that for Glasgow, which still remains the case today:

*"Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of His word and the praising of His name"*

From the earliest days of European settlement in Australia, Presbyterians arrived establishing their churches, and oftentimes schools, wherever they settled. One of the prime areas for Scottish settlement was Victoria's Western District where, in town after town, our Scottish and Irish forebears settled, entering fully into the life of growing local communities, being farmers, storekeepers, school teachers, town councillors, with men like Robert Menzies entering politics and serving their nation.

The Rev James Forbes (1813-1851), the first fulltime Presbyterian minister in Melbourne encapsulated in himself the concern for others. He was first minister of Scots Church, visited prisoners, helped establish the Stranger's Friend Society for the benefit of needy people, founded the Ladies Benevolent Society, was one of several to help establish the Melbourne Hospital. The plight of the indigenous people upset him considerably leading him to petition the Government on their behalf. He established a total of four schools, one of which is today's Scotch College. His biographer, Dr Mairi Harman, writes, "James Forbes was a highly public person who participated in all the activities he thought were for the good of the people of Melbourne".

In time not only were schools and societies formed, but also a multitude of health and welfare institutions established, such as St Andrew's Hospital, East Melbourne, homes for destitute women, children's homes, men's hostels, rest homes, and mission stations among Australia's indigenous peoples – the latter taking place during a time when the aborigines were held in low regard by the settlers. The Royal Flying Doctor Service was started by the Rev John Flynn, Presbyterian minister from Victoria and Superintendent of the Australian Inland Mission. Both Francis Ormond, benefactor of many institutions including RMIT and Ormond College at the University of Melbourne, and H.V. McKay, inventor and producer of the first successful combine harvester, were notable Presbyterian laymen. In more recent times, Professor Graeme Clark, inventor of the bionic ear, has been a Presbyterian elder.

In 2007, *The Age* newspaper reported, 'A study at Monash University showed that religion is strongly identified with positive life outcomes. Andrew Singleton, in the School of Political and Social Inquiry, writes,

"The religiously active are more prone to have positive civic attitudes, display high levels of social concern and be actively involved in community service. Active Christians, for example, do far more hours of volunteer work per month than do secular youth. On a measure of the extent to which a person holds positive human values-favouring an ethical life, justice for all and having an orientation for the common good- we also found that the religiously active were streets ahead.... Well what about the young atheists? Most secular-minded youth are more self-oriented because there is no widely understood or shared ethical paradigm on which to model their lives ... Perhaps the vociferous anti-religious types could afford to be a little less triumphalist. Some may see religion as a tired old superstition, but it does produce our most ethical and caring adults- believe it or not."

Today, following the 1977 formation of the Uniting Church, the Presbyterian Church of Victoria – while being a smaller body, with most of its health and welfare agencies having passed into the Uniting Church – has nevertheless commenced three new schools, Kings College, Warrnambool, Belgrave Heights Christian School and St Andrew's Christian College, Burwood. Additionally, chaplains have been placed in most hospitals, mainly on a volunteer basis, as well as in a number of police stations and prisons.

## Conclusion

The above analysis demonstrates that Christianity cannot and never has been confined to the home and the Church. Christianity is a religion involving all of life. The Presbyterian Church, both corporately and more especially through its members, will continue to involve itself in public life. Indeed, partly because of the continuing if not accelerating decline in the nation's welfare and public life, it is likely that the Christian voice and presence in practical ways in the public domain will only increase in future years.

That this should be the case is fully in accord with Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Australia is a signatory:

*Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions (such as religion) and without unreasonable restrictions:*

*(a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;*

*(b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;*

*(c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.*

Finally, it needs to be pointed out that in times past in the West, just as today in many parts of the world, Christians suffer persecution and even martyrdom at the hands of the state. In the history of Presbyterian Church we have just such a heritage. In the so called "killing time" of the 1680's, 18,000 Scottish Presbyterians were killed, exiled, imprisoned or tortured, such persecution only ceasing with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which brought William of Orange and his wife Mary to the throne. We remember our history. Those 18,000 Presbyterians were not persecuted as private believers but as citizens refusing the religious claims of the state over them. They suffered in the public domain, in what might be described as a sometimes gentle but always determined and a strangely loyal defiance of the state's claim on their ultimate allegiance. We trust that we might not be entering such a time again, but if we are, then it needs to be understood that if put to a choice, our loyalty will be first and foremost to our Lord Jesus Christ.

*This article has largely been taken from the submission of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria to a review of the exceptions and exemptions in the Equal Opportunity Act 1995 being conducted at the present time by the Victorian Parliament. It benefited considerably from the contributions of Mr John Ballantyne Rev Dr Peter Barclay (members of the Victorian Church & Nation Committee), Rev Neil Benfell, Principal of Kings College, Warrnambool, Rev Dr Peter Barnes, Church historian and Rev Dr Michael Jensen, lecturer at Moore Theological College. The actual submission with sources for quotes may be found here:*

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