

***Truth, Faith & Freedom in a Hostile World – Friday 12 Sept 2014***  
**Defending the Good: Christianity and the Roots of Religious  
Liberty**

**Introduction**

I am grateful to Peter Bentley and the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church of Australia for their kind invitation to address you this morning. Of course, the person you should have been listening to now is Ms Chelsea Pietsch, the Executive Officer for Freedom 4 Faith. But she was not able to fly up to Sydney for this morning's session and so she invited me to speak in her place; and it is a great privilege for me to do so.

I've called my address *Defending the Good: Christianity and the Roots of Religious Liberty*. But before I get to that, let me just say a word or two by way of introduction about the Centre for Independent Studies where I work.

Founded in 1976 by its Executive Director, Greg Lindsay, the CIS is a think tank committed to promoting a classical, liberal conception of society and to advancing the cause of liberty in all aspects of Australian political, economic, and social life. Our philosophical orientation has been hugely inspired by thinkers such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. Indeed it was Hayek himself who, in his 1949 work, *The Intellectuals and Socialism*, observed:

"Unless we can make the philosophic foundations of a free society once more a living intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the ingenuity and imagination of our liveliest minds, the prospects of freedom are indeed dark. But if we can regain that belief in the power of ideas which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost."

One of the aims of the CIS is to ensure that those philosophical foundations remain a living intellectual issue in Australia. Although we are a non-religious organisation, the CIS recognises the significant contribution that religion makes to a liberal society, not just in terms of the cohesiveness that religious communities promote but also through the spirit of volunteerism and community engagement that religion and religious communities help to promote.

And so it is that the CIS developed the Religion and the Free Society program to examine just those dimensions of liberal society. I came to this project very much from the point of view of a practitioner rather than as an academic specialist. I have been an Anglican Minister of Religion in full-time ministry since 1986, and before joining the CIS in early 2011 I had been Rector of a large church in the Sydney CBD.

The theme of this conference, *Truth, Faith and Freedom in a Hostile World*, is a reflection of the challenges faced by religious believers in an age when secularism is widely, if incorrectly, understood to stand

for the exclusion of all religion from the common arena of life – the arena sometimes known as ‘the public square’. This push to exclude religion helps to explain some of the hostility with which believers increasingly need to contend.

In my address this morning, I want to do a number of things. First, I want to affirm what I see as the importance of religion for the flourishing of the whole human person. Second, I want to look more closely at the word ‘secular’ and to test the cogency of its commonly understood meaning. And third, I want to argue that when religion is threatened by the pursuit of what passes for ‘tolerance’, freedom is threatened, too.

Indeed, the key point I wish to make is that far from being hostile to religion, secularism, properly understood, actually has its roots in religion; and more specifically, in Christianity. As the intellectual historian, Larry Siedentop, and to whom I will be referring later, has remarked, “Secularism identifies the conditions in which authentic beliefs should be formed and defended.”<sup>1</sup>

Far from feeling intimidated by an aggressive hostility directed at religion, believers can draw confidence from knowing that freedoms such as freedom of religion actually have their roots in religious faith.

Indeed, that’s the reason that I have called this paper *Defending the Good: Christianity and the Roots of Religious Liberty*.

## **Religion and Human Flourishing**

Many had hoped – and even predicted - that religious belief would wither in the heat of twenty-first century scientific criticism, but this hope has proved to be unfounded. Of course, it is true that the development of science in the modern era demonstrated that much of what the churches had earlier claimed as ‘knowledge’ turned out not to be knowledge at all. Some of those claims either turned out not to be true or to have been based on unreliable sources. But the rise of scientific method did give rise to a more pervasive mood of rejection.

As the philosopher Dallas Willard has remarked, “That mood became an intellectual and academic lifestyle and spread across the social landscape as an authority in its own right. It branded all...religious ‘knowledge’ as mere illusion or superstition and all of the sources of such knowledge as unreliable or even delusory.”<sup>2</sup>

And so it came to be that mathematics and the natural sciences were accorded the right to proclaim what was meaningful, reliable and true. The very idea of *religious* knowledge was almost a contradiction in terms.

Yet religion, with its concern for the primary questions of life and existence, has refused to go away. There are three factors, all quite closely linked, which help to account for the raised profile religion continues to enjoy in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

First, we have seen the rapid spread of traditional, conservative expressions of religions, such as Christianity and Islam, in recent years that have claimed to be bastions of certainty in an uncertain world. Second, we are still seeing, and with a heightened awareness, the terrible consequences of religious zealotry in the early years of the twenty-first century. And finally, we see that these developments have been accompanied by a third factor: a greater readiness on the part of religious believers to assert, often aggressively, their right to the free expression of their beliefs.

Well, if we are to defend religion as a key component of human flourishing and well-being – in other words, as a public good - it will be helpful, at this point, to come to some understanding of what we mean by ‘religion’. It’s a vague and elusive term, but the Australian Human Rights Commission has offered the following very workable definition:

“Religion can be taken to refer to an organised form of maintaining, promoting, celebrating and applying the consequences of engagement with what is taken to be ultimately defining, environing, totally beyond, totally other, and yet profoundly encountered within life. These activities are usually done by or in association with a group, an organisation and/or community.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the component I would add to this definition is that religion can also be said to have its roots in the awareness of a supreme being. Let us say, then, that religion can be characterised by

a belief in supernatural, transcendent agents and powers that makes demands of its adherents by imposing a standard of moral behaviour which sets criteria for conduct.

It is precisely because religion, as understood in this way, helps to give shape to the way we live our lives and pursue values and meaning that we can describe religion as a basic human good. As natural law theorist Robert George has remarked:

“The existential raising of religious questions... are all parts of the human good of religion – a good whose pursuit is an indispensable feature of the comprehensive flourishing of a human being.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, religion is one of the many ingredients necessary for a good, fulfilling and meaningful life. Robert George goes on to argue that if we accept this understanding of religion, then respect for a person’s well-being:

“...demands respect for his or her flourishing as a seeker of religious truth and as a man or woman who lives in line with his or her best judgement of what is true in spiritual matters. And that, in turn, requires respect for his or her liberty in the religious quest - the quest to understand religious truth and order one’s life in line with it.”<sup>5</sup>

Religious liberty is so central to human flourishing because unlike politics or culture, religion alone is ultimately concerned with the search for the truth concerning the divine (including whether or not

there God exists) and the meaning of that truth for human action and choice.<sup>6</sup>

I think it is fair to say that the assertive religiosity I referred to earlier, often dogmatic and uncompromising in its nature though it can be, does contribute, in part, to the hostile environment in which religious believers today try to live out their faith. At the same time, in the West, advocates of secularism are hostile to the public manifestation of religion because they believe that religion and secularism are irreconcilable opponents.

The term 'secular' can bear many meanings but essentially describes a political outlook which is neutral as to the existence or even relevance of a religious dimension in public affairs, but recognises the importance of religion to citizens. However, a more aggressive form of secularism, to which I am referring, is actively hostile to any manifestation or expression of religious belief in the public sphere.

As Rowan Williams put it in a lecture delivered at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in Rome in 2006, this form of hostile secularism "assumes that the public expression of specific convictions is automatically offensive to people of other (or no) conviction."<sup>7</sup> It's not hard to find examples of this popular misconception of secularism here in Australia. The Secular Party of Australia, for instance, on the home page of its web sites says this:

“As 21st century citizens, we want to challenge the power and privilege of religious institutions in Australia. As secular humanists, we want an end to religious interference in education, health, civil liberties and taxation. As champions of human rights, we want women, minorities and the LGBTI community to be free of discrimination and the dictates of archaic superstition.”

*Interference, superstition, discrimination* – these are just a few of the charges commonly levelled at religious believers today, as you will know well enough. And they are charges coloured by an aggressive hostility to religion that actively seeks to establish unbelief as the norm for our society. And they go to show that the issue of freedom of religion is becoming increasingly pressing in our society.

But this is not just an issue for members of religious communities. I think that these threats to religious freedom raise concerns for all Australians, regardless of whether or not they profess any religious belief themselves, because they go to the heart of the relationship between truth, faith and freedom.

### **Christianity and the Genius of Individual Moral Agency**

In his recent Annual Lecture on Religious Liberty delivered at Notre Dame University in Sydney, the Federal Attorney-General, Senator George Brandis, remarked that it is a mistake to hold that human rights and the liberal premises that underlie them are a product of the modern world alone. “The governing ethical principle which underlies our modern understanding of human rights,” he said, “that

is, the moral equality of every human person and his or her right to liberty which flows from that, has its origins in the gospels.”<sup>8</sup>

In making this claim, the Attorney-General was citing an important new book by the political and intellectual historian, Larry Siedentop called *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* in which Siedentop argues that liberal thought is the offspring not of the Enlightenment but of Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

The kernel of Siedentop’s argument is that the ancient, pre-Christian world had at its heart the assumption of natural inequality. The golden thread linking the Western liberal principles truth, faith and freedom is the principle of individual moral agency and the assumption of the inherent equality of all human beings.

Siedentop argues that this thread can be traced right back to the Gospels, to the writings of St Paul and his exposition of the ‘The Christ’ to describe the presence of God in the world, and ultimately to the teachings of Jesus himself which proclaim the supreme moral fact about humans: we are all created in the image of God.

As Siedentop puts it: “Delving below all social divisions of labour, Paul finds, beneath the conventional terms that confer status and describe roles, a shared reality. That reality is the human capacity to think and choose, to will. That reality is our potential for understanding ourselves as autonomous agents, as truly the children of God.”<sup>10</sup>

The genius of Christianity is that by investing every individual with the God-given capacity for individual moral agency, human beings are no longer to be defined by social location or status. Rather, life 'in Christ' creates what Siedentop calls "a rightful domain for individual conscience and choice."<sup>11</sup> In the course of the Middle Ages canon lawyers and philosophers began to work out the elements of rights which needed to protect the notion of individual identity and agency.

In this way Siedentop builds his compelling argument that the foundation of modern Europe lay "in the long, difficult process of converting a moral claim [about the individual] into a social status [concerning individual agency and with rights to protect the free exercise of that identity]."

"It was pursuit of belief in the equality of souls that made the conversion possible. A commitment to individual liberty sprang from that. Combining the two values gave rise to the principle which more than any other has defined modern liberal thinking, the principle of 'equal liberty'."<sup>12</sup>

While never side-stepping the church's shortcomings in upholding the ideal of individual liberty and freedom of conscience, Siedentop makes the bold and, I think, truthful claim that because of its central egalitarian moral insight about individual liberty, Christianity played such a decisive part in the development of the individual and the concept of individual liberty that it can be said to have changed the ground of human identity.<sup>13</sup>

This central insight is, in turn, the crux of ‘secularism’, in the more neutral sense to which I referred at the outset: that is, the recognition of, and commitment to a sphere of conscience or belief in which each individual is free to make his or her own decisions.

In Siedentop’s words, “It rests on the firm belief that to be human means being a rational and moral agent, a free chooser with responsibility for one’s actions... It joins rights with duties to others.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, secularism identifies the appropriate ways in which authentic beliefs should be formed and defended.

The aggressive, hostile secularism of our own age has scrambled the proper relationship between liberty and faith, and in doing so has also distorted what should be a healthy relation between secularism and religion. These are themes I have addressed in a report I published recently at the CIS called *The Forgotten Freedom: Threats to Religious Liberty in Australia* and which, if you are interested, is available online at [www.cis.org.au](http://www.cis.org.au)

### **The Tyranny of Tolerance?**

At one time, the mark of the good citizen in the liberal state used to be the free and unselfconscious display of personal conviction about ideas and beliefs and morals. That kind of open manifestation of conviction has, however, given way to what can best be described as an ostentatious display of ‘open-mindedness’ that attempts to appeal to the culturally fashionable values of tolerance and diversity.

This enthusiasm for managing diversity has its historical roots in the sincere desire to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of race or ethnicity which gave rise to the Racial Discrimination Act brought on to the statute book by the Whitlam Government in 1975. The Act was intended as a means of eradicating racism; however, its values have since set the tone for subsequent debates about equality, social inclusion, and tolerance.

Too often, tolerance is actually intolerant of traditional religious beliefs that are often ruled to be incompatible with the values of the secular state. The Australian scholar Samuel Gregg who is based at the Acton Institute in the USA has remarked that:

“Tolerance is no longer about creating the space for us to express our views about the nature of good and evil and its implications for law and public morality, or to live our lives in accordance with our religious beliefs. Instead, tolerance serves to banish the truth as the reference point against which all of us must test our ideas and beliefs.”<sup>15</sup>

Although I think it is a pressing matter, the issue of religious freedom doesn't seem to generate much excitement these days. Controversy surrounding institutional responses to the sexual abuse of children, as well as a marked lack of sympathy for some points of view propounded by religious leaders on issues such as human sexuality and voluntary euthanasia, has helped push religion to the margins of public life.

Indeed, it is no longer widely considered appropriate at all for religion to be practised in the full glare of the social and cultural realm. For there, expressions of religious conviction and belief might jar with one another and conflict. Far better, many people now say, for religion to be confined to the private realm of the mind where it can be considered almost a hobby or taste preference with as little capacity to cause offence as an enthusiasm for astrology.

And indeed, just as formal participation in religious institutions in Australia is declining, so believers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that religious faith is a positive rather than a negative feature of a liberal society.

The ethicist Oliver O'Donovan has observed: 'Civil societies are necessarily tolerant to a degree, and intolerant to a degree; they punish what they cannot afford to tolerate [and] tolerate what they cannot afford to punish.'<sup>16</sup> Efforts to redefine the boundary between the necessary power of the state to coerce and the right of religious freedom are frequently in the news.

For example, when the High Court recently struck down the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare program as unconstitutional, it did so because the program was not authorised by a specific head of power under the Constitution. However, the challenge was motivated not by a concern to protect states' rights but by secular objections to the open involvement of religious groups in public

schools. No surprises then that when the High Court handed down its decision it was widely celebrated as a victory for secularism.

Yet all citizens of a free society, whether or not they are Christians and whether or not they are religious believers, should have a strong commitment to upholding and defending religious liberty. “Religious freedom doesn’t just concern our role as citizens in the public square,” says Samuel Gregg. “Religious liberty also concerns our freedom to choose in numerous non-political aspects of our lives, ranging from whether we attend church on a given day of the week, to what we choose to purchase.”<sup>17</sup>

What this also makes clear is that in any discussion of religious liberty, belief and practice must be understood as being inseparable: freedom to believe must surely be accompanied by the freedom to speak, to associate, and to order one’s life in accordance with one’s beliefs.

The right to religious liberty, therefore, is a fundamental right that confers upon the citizen of the liberal state the freedom to pursue their conception of the good life. If one accepts that religion is about the human pursuit of ultimate meaning and value, it is not hard to see that the erosion of religious liberty hinders the pursuit of a higher purpose that can contribute significantly to deep human fulfilment and satisfaction.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, this pursuit will not necessarily be consensual. Those whose ways of life are guided by the search for ultimate meaning and a solemn obligation to live dutifully are highly likely to clash with the values of the secular state – which ever of the meanings we assign to the word ‘secular’. And in any diverse, modern Western society, wrangling about questions of ultimate meaning among adherents of different religions is certainly bound to cause offense to someone.

So when we talk about religious freedom, what we are essentially talking about is the extent to which the state should permit both the free expression of religious belief and the attendant wrangling about ultimate meaning and purpose. In the pithy words of Australian philosopher Russell Blackford, “Religious freedom is essentially a freedom from state persecution, not a guarantee of a religion’s ongoing credibility or its success in the contest of rival ideas.”<sup>18</sup>

I think Blackford has got it about right in this formulation, but the language he uses, which draws upon the idea of the state and of the overcoming of inequalities of social status, does make it sound as though religious liberty is essentially a modern notion, the creation, perhaps of the era of intellectual development we call the Enlightenment. Yet as I have argued, drawing upon the work of Larry Siedentop, secularism and equality have their roots not, as many suppose, in the Enlightenment, but rather in Christianity itself.

Critics of Christianity, or rather of the churches, remain unconvinced by this. Writing in *The Guardian* the other day, David Marr distilled his scepticism about what he described as the “argument being pushed energetically by the conservative think tanks of the nation”:

“That the churches are owed a great debt for the liberty of the modern world. And the quid pro quo being demanded is fresh respect for what churches call religious liberty... But when the churches talk about religious liberty in peril these days they have only a couple of things on their minds: the freedom of the faiths to define marriage for everyone, and their freedom not to have homosexuals on the payroll.”<sup>19</sup>

I admire David Marr but I don't think he is correct about this. Whilst the churches certainly have views about marriage, these views can be very different and do not coincide precisely. For instance, opinions in the Anglican Church, to which I belong, are divided with people both opposed to and supportive of changes to the Marriage Act. Nor are these views which the churches seek to impose on, as Marr puts it, “everyone”.

Rather, the principle of religious liberty is being urged to protect the churches from having a new, secular meaning of marriage imposed upon them by the state. As for the punishment of homosexuals, if there is a threat to homosexual people in Australia it is now far more likely to come from Islam than from Christianity, although I think this is a point David Marr has yet to develop.

Religious liberty is important because when religion operates in a world of free choice, it will either flourish or fail. As such, freedom of religion needs to be protected not just for the benefit of religious believers but for the benefit of every member of society.

This is a point made by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in their best-selling book *God is Back*. They argue that secularisation theorists were wrong to claim that modernity and religion are incompatible but right to warn of religion as a dangerous political force.

However, if religion is to flourish in a world of free choice, thereby allowing people to pursue lives reflecting their authentic judgements about the truth of spiritual matters, then an important challenge confronts the secular liberal state. The challenge is 'to construct a constitutional regime that makes room for religion without sacrificing the fundamental principles of liberal pluralism.'<sup>20</sup>

Questions of religious value and fulfilment are important. We must strive to ensure that religious voices are neither silenced nor confined to the realm of the mind. And we must be vigilant in holding the state accountable for its responsibility to enshrine and uphold the right to religious liberty as fundamental human right.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, (Penguin: London, 2014), 361

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Personal Religion, Public Reality? Towards a Knowledge of Faith*, (Hodder: London, 2009), 25

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- <sup>3</sup> AHRCH (Australian Human Rights Commission), *Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia* (2011), 4
- <sup>4</sup> Robert P. George, *Conscience and its Enemies*, (Delaware: ISI Books, 2013), 119
- <sup>5</sup> Robert P. George, *ibid.*, 119
- <sup>6</sup> Samuel Gregg, *Tea Party Catholic*, (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2013), 146
- <sup>7</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Secularism, Faith and Freedom,' Lecture delivered at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Rome (23 November 2006)
- <sup>8</sup> George Brandis, *Annual Lecture on Religious Liberty*, (University of Notre Dame Australia, 20 August 2014) <https://soundcloud.com/notredame-1/annual-lecture-on-religious-liberty-george-brandis>
- <sup>9</sup> Larry Siedentop, *ibid.*, 332
- <sup>10</sup> Larry Siedentop, *ibid.*, 65
- <sup>11</sup> Larry Siedentop, *ibid.*, 305
- <sup>12</sup> Larry Siedentop, *ibid.*, 339
- <sup>13</sup> Larry Siedentop, *ibid.*, 352
- <sup>14</sup> Larry Siedentop, *ibid.*, 361
- <sup>15</sup> Samuel Gregg, *Tea Party Catholic*, (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2013), 140
- <sup>16</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008), 36
- <sup>17</sup> Samuel Gregg, 'Religious Freedom and Economic Liberty: Truly Indivisible', *The American Spectator* (5 August 2014)
- <sup>18</sup> Russell Blackford, *Freedom of Religion and the Secular State* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 191
- <sup>19</sup> David Marr, 'George Brandis's religious liberty is really about the right to define marriage', (*The Guardian*, 1 September 2014)
- <sup>20</sup> John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 367