

N.Z. ASSOCIATION OF RATIONALISTS & HUMANISTS (Inc.)

ESTABLISHED 1927

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Race Relations Commissioner
Human Rights Commission
PO Box 121411
THORNDON
Wellington

Submission on Draft National Statement on Religious Diversity

Dear Sir,

I am writing on behalf of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists. The NZARH is a non-profit organisation that exists to serve the interests of non-religious people in New Zealand.

Purpose of Statement

According to the background to the Draft Statement, the purpose of the Statement is to: *“promote religious tolerance, improve communication between government and faith communities, affirm the right to freedom of religion, and to provide a framework for the development and maintenance of harmonious relationships within communities.”*

“Promote religious tolerance”

Most religions have lists of things which their adherents aren't allowed to tolerate. These intolerables usually include unbelievers, other gods, and religions. Triangle Television has screened Islamic programmes which make many offensive and untrue statements about atheists and agnostics. It is the intrinsic nature of many religions to be intolerant of other groups.

I would suggest that the purpose of the Statement be simply to encourage religious or non-religious people to be tolerant of the beliefs and practices of other religions or non-religious people.

“Improve communication between government and faith communities”

The government should be communicating with all communities, whether they are religious or not. Religions should not be advising or directing Government.

“Affirm the right to freedom of religion”

This should be: *“Affirm the right to freedom of religion and freedom from religion”*.

Honorary Associates: Gianni Bartocci, H James Birx, Raymond Bradley, Steve Cooper, Richard Dawkins, Warwick Don, Zoë During, Denis Dutton, Sanal Edamaruku, Brian Edwards, Antony Flew, Levi Fragell, Ida Gaskin, Maurice Gee, Dame Barbara Goodman, Finngeir Hiorth, Bernard Howard, Paul Kurtz, Lavanam, Richard Leakey, Tim Madigan, Michael Martin, Taslima Nasrin, Jean-Claude Pecker, Ian Plimer, Anwar Shaikh, Younas Shaikh, Barbara Smoker, Dame Catherine Tizard, David Tribe, Ibn Warraq, Lewis Wolpert

“Provide a framework for the development and maintenance of harmonious relationships within communities”

I think that homogenising the population by removing separate religious schools and the option of home schooling for the religious would go further in reaching this goal than a Statement on Religious Diversity.

With regard to the purpose of the Draft statement, our Bill of Rights covers religious freedoms more eloquently and effectively.

Definitions

I would like to clarify some words used in the draft Statement.

The word “faith communities” is obviously a politically correct substitute for the word “religions” and I see no need to use it instead of the word “religions”.

The word “shall” is used often in the draft Statement. It ought to be replaced with “should.”

The word “belief” should not be used interchangeably with the word “faith”. This is because the word faith means belief in something without proof or evidence. Faith is an adjective that describes the belief.

Rationalism, Humanism and some versions of Buddhism are examples of non-faith based belief.

Background

The single most important thing missing from the Background section is that New Zealand is a predominantly secular society. The 2006 census shows that 1.297 million people currently living in New Zealand are non-religious.

The Statement should include all New Zealanders. It could achieve this if it was a Statement on the Diversity of Beliefs in New Zealand.

The reference to the Treaty of Waitangi is erroneous. Governor Hobson was referring only to the Catholic, Protestant and Maori religions. Nor has the State recognised a diversity of beliefs in New Zealand ever since the Treaty. The religions of the early Chinese immigrants were completely ignored.

The Statement

1. The State and Religion

“New Zealand has no state religion.” This is not strictly true. New Zealand is a Constitutional Monarchy, and our Monarch is the head of the Church of England.

Furthermore, our Parliament opens with a prayer, our Flag has three Christian crosses on it, our public holidays are Christian, and our National Anthem refers to the Christian God.

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I would recommend that the Government remove the prayers in Parliament, change the flag to something people from overseas will recognise, and find a more musical National Anthem.

“The State treats all faith communities and those who profess no religion equally before the law.”

This is patently not true. Non-religious people are treated differently by the Government in the following ways:

Tax: Non-profit non-religious organisations have to pay tax, whereas religious organisations are exempted from paying income tax.

Religious exemptions from employment laws: The Exclusive Brethren can ban union representatives and forbid employees to speak their own language using special religious exemptions. No non-religious employer can do that.

Blasphemous Libel: The Crimes Act says: *“Every one is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year who publishes any blasphemous libel.”* This law directly contradicts the Freedom of Expression Clause in The Bill of Rights. It should be removed.

Religious instruction and observances in State primary schools: The Education Act (1964) states that: *“the school as a whole, may be closed ... for the purposes of religious instruction ... and of religious observances.”* Currently religious instruction in Primary Schools is carried out by Protestant Christians and all other groups are excluded. It is important to note that this is not religious *education* but religious *instruction*. It should have been repealed when the rest of the 1964 Education Act was repealed.

Religious Schools: Religious Schools receive money from Government yet they serve only to segregate children from mainstream society.

2. The Right to Religion

“New Zealand upholds the right to freedom of religion and belief and the right to freedom from discrimination on the grounds of religious or ethical belief.”

I agree with this point.

3. The Right to Safety

“Faith communities have a right to safety and security.”

The Government has a duty to do their best to ensure that everyone is safe, whether they are religious or not. Religious people do not need extra security.

4. The Right of Freedom of Expression

“The right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press are vital for democracy, but shall be exercised with responsibility and in an informed manner.”

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I do not think that the proviso “*shall be exercised with responsibility and in an informed manner*” should be attached. Having a responsible and informed press is not going to prevent people being offended. The potential to cause offence is a necessary corollary of a tolerant society.

5. Recognition and Accommodation

“Reasonable steps shall be taken in educational and work environments and in the delivery of public services to recognise and accommodate different religious beliefs and practices.”

What might these steps be?

Some religious groups have faith-based beliefs that require circumcision of male babies. The public medical services are currently complicit in the genital mutilation of male babies.

There have been instances where religious doctors have refused to give patients hormones or contraceptives because of their personal religious beliefs.

6. Education

“Schools shall teach an understanding of the diversity of religious and spiritual traditions in an impartial manner.”

Why should we only teach religious and spiritual philosophy when there is so much more to philosophy?

Will this apply to Home Schoolers? While home schooling may be beneficial for children with special needs, the number of home schoolers who do so for religious reasons is on the rise. These are people who would not want their children taught in an impartial manner about other religions.

7. Religious Differences

“Debate and disagreement about religious beliefs within faith communities and beyond is inevitable, but shall be exercised within the rule of law and without resort to violence.”

I agree with this point.

8. Cooperation and understanding

“Government and faith communities shall seek to build and maintain positive relationships with each other,”

After the episode of the Exclusive Brethren and the National Party, I do not think New Zealanders are going to be in favour of improving relationships between government and religions. Religions should not be advising Government. The Government should remain neutral with respect to religions.

“...and promote tolerance and understanding in the community.”

I agree with this point.

recommendations

The British Government has for some time had a public policy emphasising a diversity approach that elevated cultural or religious traditions above the values of a liberal democracy. It is now abandoning that approach as it has proved to be a failure.

I think we need to take heed of the British experience.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions relating to this submission.

yours faithfully

Elizabeth McKenzie
President, NZARH