

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

EST. 1927

Rationalist House, 64 Symonds Street, Auckland 1010, New Zealand
Telephone: (+64) 9-373 5131, Facsimile: (+64) 9-379 8233
E-mail: admin@nzarh.org.nz Web: www.nzarh.org.nz

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Professor Paul Morris
Religious Studies
Victoria University of Wellington
by email: nzdiversity@hrc.co.nz

Review of Statement on Religious Diversity

Dear Professor Morris,

I am writing on behalf of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.) to express our views on the *Statement on Religious Diversity*. The NZARH is a non-profit organisation that exists to serve the interests of non-religious people in New Zealand.

The NZARH opposed the *Statement on Religious Diversity* when it was released in 2007 due to it discriminating against the non-religious. As the Statement is to be reviewed this year we offer the following recommendations for its improvement.

Discrimination in the clause on safety

The clause on safety discriminates by failing to extend the right of safety to those who do not belong to faith communities. This clause currently reads:

"Faith communities and their members have a right to safety and security".

While everyone has a right to safety and security, the *Statement on Religious Diversity* fails to make this clear. We recommend that the clause be reworded to the more inclusive:

"All people have a right to safety, irrespective of their faith or beliefs".

In addition the current commentary accompanying the clause on safety needs to include more than just the perspective of religious communities. We know of individuals who chose to leave a faith community and are not only ostracised, but also fear for their personal safety. One of the key reasons given for developing the *Statement on Religious Diversity* was to avoid the religious intolerance and violence that has been seen in other countries.

The special relationship between government and faith communities

The clause on government and faith communities contradicts the *New Zealand Bill of Rights Act*. The clause currently states:

"Government and faith communities have a responsibility to build and maintain positive relationships with each other, and to promote mutual respect and understanding."

Faith communities, like any other group of citizens, cannot be compelled to build positive relationships with government. Faith communities must be able to freely express their views

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about government whether positive or not. These rights of freedom of association and freedom of expression are set out in the *Bill of Rights Act*. Furthermore, government must treat faith communities in the same way as any other group. Discrimination based on religious belief is a breach of the *Human Rights Act*.

This clause seems to be the closest that the *Statement on Religious Diversity* comes to dealing with the problem of minority groups who decline integration and who do not share common values with the rest of society. There is no single easy solution to this problem but a starting point is along the lines of:

“Government has a responsibility to encourage its citizens to participate in society.”

Fulfilling the goals behind the Statement on Religious Diversity

The *Statement on Religious Diversity* doesn't make clear the rights and responsibilities relating to religion that exist under New Zealand law. In contrast the *Statement on Race Relations* developed by the Race Relations Commissioner clearly explains both the law and complaint process. We feel that the *Statement on Religious Diversity* would benefit from the same thorough approach that has been taken with the *Race Relations* document.

It was intended that the Statement would provide a starting point for discussions and offer guidance when religious issues did arise. For this to be practical the statement needs to both reflect NZ law and also be accepted by the wider community. Currently the published list of those that have endorsed the Statement includes only faith groups. Representatives of media, education or government appear to be lacking, despite clauses in the Statement that clearly involve them.

Going Forward

The key decision that needs to be made is whether the *Statement on Religious Diversity* is intended to apply only to interfaith dialogue or to the wider community.

If the Statement is intended to be relevant to the wider community then a major revision of the Statement is required including:

- Expanding the advisory group to include representatives from media, education, government and the non-religious community;
- Changing the Statement to be non-discriminatory and inclusive;
- Accurately describing NZ law and the disputes processes relevant to religious issues;
- Providing real examples about religious disputes and their resolution.

We would be happy to assist you with the development of the *Statement on Religious Diversity* if you chose to take this more inclusive path.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Geard
President
NZ Association of Rationalists & Humanists