



Religious Discrimination or Religious Revival? *Moderator's Comments* *Posted 3 March 2020*

By Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes

In any society the legal system plays an important role in steering people in the way we should treat one another. Increasingly, in modern Western societies, those who seek to maintain the legal system have become as dangerous as those who break it. The proposal for a Religious Discrimination Bill is a case in point. It has become so entangled with itself that when Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells called for it to be scrapped, the case for agreeing with her had become quite compelling. But then, for very different reasons, Michael Kirby also called for it to be scrapped, leading one to the view that perhaps there was life and reason still to be found in it. In broad terms, some of the disturbing things about our approach to politics and law today might be listed as follows:

1 Too much is expected of law and politics today. James Boswell was almost offended that his friend, Dr Samuel Johnson had a tendency to mock all schemes for political improvement and progress. In response, Johnson reassured Boswell that 'most schemes of political improvement are very laughable things.' This is not to be an excuse for doing nothing, but is a reason for not believing everything. It has become the default position for the general populace to consider that it is the task of the government and/or the judiciary to improve the weather, abolish all nasty thoughts, and usher in Utopia. Laws cannot confer freedoms; they are far more likely to take them away.

2 Anti-discrimination legislation is largely designed for the benefit of lawyers and those who can portray themselves as victims. They operate rather like Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws. If the culture is Islamic, Christians will suffer; and the same thing will happen if the culture is dominated by the

LBGTQI lobby – although there is also a faint possibility that the Islamic community could also suffer. Michael Kirby thinks he is an Anglican Christian – and it is not impossible these days that someone of his ilk could become Archbishop of Canterbury – but he beats the drum that any laws to protect religious beliefs will only divide Australians. He does not object, however, to laws that protect what is called sexual orientation. Where the lust is, there will the heart be also.

3 Corporations are increasingly behaving like Clayton's churches. Banks used to be about banking; football administrators about organising football teams and games; airlines about flying planes; and the NRMA about insurance and keeping cars on the roads. Now there is rather too much pretentious posturing about LoveSpeech and the like. The moral outrage is there for all to see. What is missing is any foundation in morality. When I want to take money out of an ATM, I am not keen on having to put up with a sermon on why this has become a GayTM. Cultural Marxism seems to have revived in the last twenty years or so, and the Frankfurt School of the 1920s has a new lease of life in critiquing everything except its own critical theory. Yet the big corporations are in cahoots with the radical trade unions – which is all very contrary to Marxism.

4 The human conscience is being disregarded and imposed upon. In his commentary on Psalm 4, Calvin commented that 'Even the heathen know that there is no better stage for virtue than a man's own conscience.' A person's conscience can be mistaken, but it is in a sense sacrosanct. At the very least even a mistaken conscience is to be respected. We are to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not ride roughshod

over them (Rom.15:1). Yet modern laws discard the rights of conscience for Christians in the medical field who refuse to take part in abortions, for example. We are expected to go along with anything in the name of diversity and tolerance.

5 The culture is more important than the legal and the political systems. This is implied in the first point. It is important to have good laws and to have solid Christians in the political arena. A frustrated William Wilberforce when moving against the slave trade, found that the British parliament 'proved above all things the extremely low ebb of real principle there.' What was missing was what he called

'resolute integrity' – and it is still missing.

We cannot save Western society. Democracy will not rescue us, nor will clever pieces of legislation. We are too far gone for any wound to be healed lightly. Above all else, what is needed is an outpouring of the Spirit of God illuminating the truth of God, and leading sinners to trust in the eternal Son of God.

Rev. Dr Peter Barnes, Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.