

An open letter from Victorian faith leaders to the Attorney General regarding the *Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021*

16 November 2021

Dear Attorney General,

We, the undersigned leaders of faith communities in Victoria, write to express our grave concerns about the *Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021* recently introduced into the Victorian Parliament.

Our faith communities work tirelessly across all sectors of society to support fellow Victorians from diverse backgrounds, believing we have much to offer the community in the services we provide. Our religious beliefs and values underpin every aspect of the work we do, especially in our care for the most vulnerable, our commitment to educating young people and our efforts to contribute to a more just and cohesive society.

Rather than allow religious bodies their natural right to operate in accordance with their beliefs, the *Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021* seeks to go well beyond what might be considered reasonable or healthy in a pluralist society. In introducing the legislation, the Victorian Government is seeking to dictate how faith communities should run their organisations. This gross overreach could see religious organisations being forced to violate their beliefs and values in managing employment matters.

For people of faith, religious beliefs shape all aspects of life. Parents that send their children to religious schools expect that the school's environment faithfully represents the religious ethos in every respect including the conduct of all teachers and staff. With this Bill, the ability for schools to meet this legitimate expectation will be severely compromised because, in effect, the Bill erroneously disconnects religious belief from conduct that is consistent with this belief.

The Bill unfairly targets religious bodies and educational institutes. If passed, the legislation would impose restrictions on religious organisations that are not imposed upon other sectors of society, including Government bodies and political parties. If it is understood that it is advantageous for political parties and ministerial offices to hire staff who adhere to their beliefs and values, why is not the same standard being applied to religious organisations as well?

This is an unnecessary and unreasonable overreach of Government power and not appropriate in a tolerant and democratic society, where the rights of all people – including people of faith – should be respected.

We urge you and the Government to pause before pushing through such a drastic change that upsets the current balance which has proven to be fair and workable. We also urge the Government to conduct meaningful consultation with faith groups and other stakeholders which will be in the interest of all Victorians.

Yours sincerely,

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Anglican Diocese of Melbourne

Bishop Greg Bennet
Catholic Diocese of Sale

Makarand Bhagwat
Hindu Council of Australia

Bishop Paul Bird CSsR
Catholic Diocese of Ballarat

Reverend Father
Shenouda Boutros
Coptic Orthodox Diocese
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Bishop Mykola Bychok CSsR
Eparchy of Saints Peter and
Paul of Melbourne for Ukrainian
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Zealand and Oceania

Archbishop Peter A Comensoli
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Gurdeep Singh Matharoo
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Mitred Archpriest Michael
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Bishop Bosco Puthur
Syro-Malabar Eparchy of St
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Sheikh Muhammad Nawas Saleem
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Adel Salman
Islamic Council of Victoria

Reverend Ian Smith
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Jasbir Singh Suropada
Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria

Bishop Evmenios Vasilopoulos
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