

## ***The Universal Struggle between Christianity and Secular Humanism.***

***In recent years the denigration and vilification of Bible believing Christians and religious fundamentalists has become a growth industry In Australia the electronic and newsprint media has been largely the facilitator of this attack rather than a moderating voice.***

***A Queensland science teacher informed a student that he had no place in his biology class because he had creationists beliefs.***

***University Christian leaders and chaplains in Australia have experienced mounting pressure from administrators to limit evangelical activity.***

The religious liberty legal battlefield has become a new “growth industry” in the United States. In Australia there are also ominous signs that religious liberties are being increasingly undermined. A growing number of reports indicate a rising level of hostility towards Christians, with intimidation and vilification now becoming more widespread.

In response to this legitimate concern a number of Christian legal bodies have emerged in the U.S. to meet the challenge, and others outside the United States are seeking similar legal protections.

Some question whether there is even a problem and theorise that the horror stories of religious persecution are exaggerated. Others take the matter seriously, and in the United States Christians have given sacrificially to protect religious liberties.

**But what are the so-called “religious liberty wars” really about?** Is there really a threat to the rights of religious persons in America and Australia? In order to understand the issues, and the way Christian lawyers are using their skills to serve Christ and protect religious liberties, we need to recognise the areas where religious liberties are at risk, and what precautions we can take in Australia to meet some of the “religious liberties wars” now being waged in the United States:

**Public Schools:** Besieged by depleted funds and staff shortages, American public schools must determine how best to cope with drugs, dysfunctional families and asocial children, premarital sex and pregnancies, AIDS, homosexuality, and so on. In the midst of these difficult issues, groups like the American Civil Liberties Union threaten schools with financial devastation for permitting activities such as Bible clubs, pro-life clubs and community religious organisations’ access to public school facilities.

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As a result of this pressure, the public schools often deny religious groups access to their facilities on the same terms as nonreligious organisations, despite clear Supreme Court decisions and federal law to the contrary. For example, at University High School in Tucson, Arizona, students were denied permission to make their Bible study group an official school club until The Rutherford Institute pointed out that the school’s denial of the Bible club was not only a violation of students’ constitutional rights, but a violation of the Equal Access Act as well. “There is increasing pressure in public schools to remove any mention of religion,” said Douglas Drury, the attorney in charge of the case. “The local governing bodies need to make sure that students don’t lose their constitutional rights when they walk through the school door.” The drive to eradicate religion from the schools has also resulted in public school efforts to deny parents the right to direct their children’s education.

**Beliefs.** State and municipal agencies continue to interfere with the rights of private citizens to choose how and with whom they should live. One case involved a Wisconsin woman who was penalised \$8,000 by an administrative law agency for placing an allegedly discriminatory classified housing ad for a “Christian handyman” to rent the upper level of her home. The woman

said she didn't intend to discriminate; she had merely wanted a tenant who could help her remodel her 100-year-old house in exchange for low rent. As a Christian, she felt an obligation to help other Christians first, although she said she wouldn't have discriminated against any stable person who applied.

**Rights and Custody/Visitation.** US Courts sometimes consider religion and Home Schooling deciding factors in custody decisions. One case in Fort Myers, Florida, involved a judge who granted a father custody of his child instead of the mother because their child was receiving a Christian education under the mothers care.

**Free Speech on Pro-Life Issues.** The infringement and restriction of free speech in connection with pro-life views continues as some types of pro-life expression become criminalized. Marilyn Hatch, a prolife protester, was convicted of a crime under the newly enacted Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act for peacefully standing and sitting in front of an abortion clinic, although she made no attempt to physically obstruct the entrance to the clinic. "Protesting legal abortion through nonviolent expression and expressive conduct should be protected under the First Amendment," said Rene Wright, the Rutherford Institute attorney who conducted Hatch's defence in the criminal case.

**Free Speech.** is perhaps most clearly seen in the cases where the government continues to restrict the right to discuss religious issues and distribute religious literature. Over and over again, people are being persecuted for sharing their faith, as in the case of two teenagers who were thrown out of a shopping mall because they were sharing their faith with customers who had consented to hear what they had to say. In another instance, police arrested four street preachers on a disturbing-the-peace charge. The preachers were leading an evangelistic outreach to persuade passersby to put their faith in God and cease their public drunkenness and their use of illegal drugs.

**Employment Discrimination.** Employers are increasingly terminating and censoring employees who, on religious grounds, resist employer programs requiring the affirmation (not just toleration) of homosexuality and the censorship of pro-life views in the work place. Some employers are even restricting their employees off-duty religious activities, as in the case of Judith Lyn Soap, an employee of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. Soap's employer forbade her from participating in a crisis pregnancy ministry at her church or any other counselling related activities.

**Church Rights/Zoning.** Zoning laws are being used increasingly across the U.S. to prevent or restrict home churches and synagogues and other religious ministries. Soup kitchens, church day care ministries, and homeless shelters are being attacked through the use of zoning regulations.

These are many of the issues in the religious liberty wars. Obviously, they are far more complicated and far-reaching than these single issues. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the issue is not simply about Christians versus everyone else. The real issue is the conflict between the religious and the secular. The gap between the two philosophical views is rapidly widening. Secularists in positions of authority continue to place restrictions on religious liberty.

Battle lines are drawn, but what are we fighting for? If left unchecked, those with the greatest impact on society – leaders in government, education, and the media – will increasingly become opponents to any religious expression in the marketplace. This antagonism will inevitably expand beyond evangelicals to include anyone who wishes to practice their religious beliefs in public.

**Constitutional Protections:** It has been revealed that most young people in the United States are unaware that freedom of religion is protected under the Constitution. There are also many Australians, Christians included, who do not realise that the Australian Constitution provided similar protections. Most Australian citizens have an extremely shallow knowledge of our Constitution and their constitutional religious rights and freedoms. This lack of awareness means that major cultural shifts, such as the loss of religious freedom, will continue to go largely

unnoticed by a significant segment of unconcerned, uninformed, and apathetic Australians – many of whom are Christians.

Religious persons of all faiths must exercise and defend their religious civil liberties in America and Australia. This means much more than debating whether there should be a constitutional amendment to protect the right to pray in public schools. It means that religious persons must first understand the problem. Second, religious persons must be convicted enough about their religion to care whether their free exercise rights are infringed. Finally, religious persons must shed their apathy, embarrassment, or fear and fight for their rights.

If religious people don't vigilantly guard their right to free speech in Australian public life, religion will become an endangered species permitted to exist only within the walls of a church. This, in turn, will erode the psyche and character of the nation.

*Adapted by John Heining from an article by Nathaniel Smith, a freelance reporter in Virginia.*