



The Uniting Church in Australia
**Submission to Inquiry into, and Report on Australia's efforts to
promote and protect Freedom of Belief.
October 2000**

1. Introduction

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948 states,
"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance". This freedom to religious belief has been valued by many Christians throughout the world as they seek to live out their commitment to faith and enter dialogue with those who come from other traditions. Freedom of belief is an important human right and reflects a commitment to a world where all people are valued.

2. The Uniting Church in Australia

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest Christian faith community within Australia. We have a long and proud involvement in advocating for Human Rights protocols both within Australia and throughout the world. This has included continued support for religious freedom both within Australia and internationally. In 1993, the Assembly Standing Committee of the UCA confirmed its support for the *'Australian Governments action in signing the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief.'*

These actions emanate from our belief that human beings are made in the image of Godⁱ. The Uniting Church in Australia holds firmly that as a result of this belief each human being is of dignity and value. We have a responsibility therefore to honour this value and ensure that individuals are not abused or violated through persecution or discrimination. Religious freedom is not only important in providing opportunity for us as Christians to practice our own beliefs but in acknowledging the religious pluralism of our world, and the innate value of each person.

3. Committee Terms of Reference

The Joint Committee has outlined three questions to which they are seeking response through this inquiry. Through our experience within the international church, and as Australians we offer the following reflections.

3.1 The extent of violations of religious freedom around the world and the probable causes of those violations

Sadly denial of religious freedom occurs on a daily basis in many different locations around the world. Such violations occur for many reasons, however generally they relate to the seeking of power and the manipulation of religious belief in gaining this power at any cost. In many settings religion is used to influence political power, however as we have seen in recent times, religious belief may be used to influence social and even economic power of individuals and communities.

While not the primary cause, religious freedom is a precipitating factor in conflicts throughout Africa, the Middle East, Europe and our closer neighbours of Indonesia. In many of these circumstances extreme expressions of some religions are used to incite violence against those who are different. This violence is then used to influence political stability within the region. This is a simple comment on a far more complex problem however it is important to reflect that religious conflicts do not always demonstrate the commitments of all whom practice those beliefs. As a result of generalizations by media and other persons, religious tensions can be heightened in situations where extreme factions of a religious group have taken power.

Religious violations are also occurring in countries where one political group from a religious majority is seeking to impose those beliefs upon others within that country. These explicit violations of religious freedom are often easier to identify than repression of religion by factional groups or inexplicably by governments.

We are aware that the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council has raised concerns with you about the situation of religious freedom within Pakistan and Hong Kong within their submission. We would concur with these concerns. We are also concerned about the religious freedom from persecution of Christians living in India, Burma and Indonesia.

3.2 Implications for other human rights arising from lack of religious freedom and religious difference

As we have seen so clearly in the Maluka Islands in recent months religious difference has the potential to precipitate violence and sectarian hatred, leading to civil and political unrest. As with other forms of hatred, religious difference and lack of religious freedom - however small can lead to other human rights abuses.

For example: Denial of access to education and health care as we see in some regions within India based on religious and social discrimination of Dalits. Lack of freedom to raise social concerns as is seen in China and Hong Kong, when raising such concerns are a fundamental part of a religious traditions. Lack of employment opportunity due to religious minority as we have seen in Pakistan.

Religious difference is sadly at the heart of many violent conflicts in the world. This is no clearer than the situation in Israel. We are well aware however that while many of these conflicts may have a religious base and involve human rights violations, the conflicts are much more complex than the religious differences themselves. In contrast to this violence there is a growing commitment amongst the world religions for a recognition and respect for religious pluralism. The Parliament of the World's Religious Forum in 1993 issued a plea for the religions to come together and overcome the culture of violence which was faced. They committed to a global ethic based on four directives:

- commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life;
- commitment to culture of solidarity and a just economic order;
- commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness;
- commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.ⁱⁱ

The importance of this statement is the commitment of world religious leaders to address the issue of violence so often attributed to religion. This is not to deny the impact of religious difference on human rights, but to work to overcoming the conflict and violence which so often stands against so many religious traditions.

3.3 The most effective means by which the Australian government and NGO's can promote freedom of religion in the region and around the world.

We believe that the most effective way to bring about change is to bear witness to the impact of an alternative. In other words, if Australia can model positive impacts of being a pluralistic society in a manner which not only respects those from different religious traditions, but advocates for the free and public practice of these traditions - we provide the image of an alternative. This is a small step in bringing about global change.

Secondly we hope that Australia will use the international power that it has to stand against violence, conflicts and abuse of human rights based on religious difference. This involves asking difficult questions of countries who are our closest neighbours about their dealings with religious minorities. It requires us to be strong advocates of the United Nations, United Nations Treaties and their implementation. It relies on well-informed trade agreements which take into consideration the impact of sanctions on the religious minorities as well as governments. Finally our foreign policy must reflect our respect our commitment to cultural and religious difference.

In practice, we need to work collaboratively, both government and NGO's in resolution of conflicts and supporting the realisation of religious pluralism throughout the world. This may be an eternal goal.

We believe that for our right to be Christian and to practice our faith to be upheld, we need to seek the same right for peoples of all religions both here within Australia and throughout the world. We are committed to continually striving for this goal. Our work in overseas aid and mission continues to support countries where religious freedom is a day to day concern, and where we seek an end to violence and the realisation of freedom.

4. Specific concerns from our experience with our overseas partners

The Uniting Church in Australia is concerned about many religious conflicts which are currently impacting on conflict in our region. We believe that more could be done to assist in the peaceful resolutions of these situations. We would particularly like to bring to your attention our concerns about breaches of religious freedom in three nations.

4.1 Indonesia and Maluka Islands

The Uniting Church in Australia supports the unitary state of Indonesia based on the recognition of religious pluralism and right of different religious groups to fully participate in the life of the nation. This support is expressed through our solidarity with the Communion of Churches in Indonesia and our partnership with seven churches and various developmental agencies in the region.

Presently religious differences Indonesia are being used to promote violence and the disintegration of local communities, particularly in the Maluku Islands. Much of this violence is being fuelled by sources which advocate a change to the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia in favour of the recognition of one particular religion. This is clearly seen through recent efforts to institute the "Jakarta Charter". The "Jakarta Charter" includes the text: "The state based on the One and Only God and *the obligation to execute the syariat Islam for those who embrace it*".

With the founding of the unitary state of Indonesia in 1945 it was agreed to erase reference to syariat Islam from the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. This was done in an effort to maintain a commitment to religious pluralism and to override the favouring of one particular religion among many.

Certain groups in Indonesia tried to institute the “Jakarta Charter” at the time of the People’s Consultative Assembly Annual General Session in August 2000. The issue was not resolved and it has been put on the agenda of next Annual General Session in 2001 or 2002. Religious minorities in Indonesia have serious fears concerning efforts to institute the “Jakarta Charter”. This is because the charter sets Muslims apart from other religious groups leading to emerging religious sectarianism, a breakdown of trust within communities and the possible disintegration of the nation.

This scenario is already taking place in the Maluku islands where a once peaceful community has disintegrated into warring Muslim and Christian factions. Religious sectarianism has now become a dangerous and powerful tool in the promotion of wider political agendas. Christian minorities are being systematically wiped out creating a terrible precedent for the destruction of other religious minorities throughout Indonesia.

4.2 India

In solidarity with our partner churches, we continue to be concerned for the life of the Dalits and minority groups within India and the ongoing religious and cultural conflicts which exist within this vast country. The situations are complex and diverse, however we continue to be concerned for the welfare of religious minority groups, and for the poverty which is often the result of cultural and religious difference.

4.3 Sri Lanka

Our concern for Sri Lanka is informed by a long relationship with partner churches within this country. The violence, persecution and lack of freedom within Sri Lanka often goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. The right to religious freedom as well as many other human rights is under threat and there is a need for the silence to be broken.

5. Conclusion

The right to religious freedom is a critical human right which under-girds not only our belief systems but also the manner in which we live our lives. We are proud to be able to practice our religion freely within Australia, and welcome those who practice different beliefs to our own. We seek this right for all human beings and seek to advocate for an end to violence caused by religious difference. We believe that the Australian government and the NGO’s have an important role to play in challenging governments which do not allow for free religious expression, and where religious difference is used to bring about violence and oppression. This needs to be actively incorporated within our foreign policy and considered in our response to issues of defence and trade. We hope that Australia will always listen to the voice of the oppressed, as well as the powerful, when considering policy decisions and actions in responding to conflicts and lack of religious freedoms.

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ⁱ p2. UnitingCare Australian and National Social Responsibility and Justice **Principles for a Fair and Equitable Social Security System in Australia – Position Paper No.3 August 2000**. The Uniting Church in Australia at the 8th Assembly in 1997 affirmed that the male and female are created in image of God. (Minute 97.19.03)

ⁱⁱ Hans Kung and Helmut Schmidt, eds., *A Global Ethic and Global Responsibility* (London;SCM Press, 1998), p17-29 in *Faith and Life in Contemporary Asian Realities*, Christian Conference of Asia, August 1999.