

CONSOLIDATION OF COMMONWEALTH ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LAWS

Submission by Aldo Bayona

Religious organisations have the right to have a voice in public debates about legislative changes. However, the arguments put forward to defend sex discrimination for religious reasons are not very different of those arguments used by Christian churches to defend slavery and those arguments can be simplified to: because that is how god wants it.

As Bertrand Russell said: “The churches, as everyone knows, opposed the abolition of slavery as long as they dared”. These days we can say: religions, as everyone knows, oppose the abolition of sex discrimination for religious reasons as long as they dare. As more and more women occupy positions of power around the world, I believe most religious leaders know on which side of history they stand. It is time for the Australian Governments to force religious organisations to awake in the 21st century by abolishing sex discrimination for religious reasons.

I note that the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has no mention of any exception at all. However, the Australian Governments have created exceptions for religious organisations in the Anti-Discrimination legislation. This is clearly against the letter and intention of CEDAW. The Australian Government has not registered any Reservation about this issue and that is very convenient for religious organisations as it looks like they are not the ones hindering the advancement of equality and human rights. If sex discrimination for religious reasons is not eliminated soon it will be time to ask the Australian Government to bring the “Truth in Advertising” principle to CEDAW by introducing a Reservation stating: “The Government of Australia is unable to eliminate sex discrimination for religious reasons” and encourage all countries in the world to do the same.

Let me finish by quoting parts of a speech by Former United States President Jimmy Carter delivered to the Parliament of the World’s Religions that took place in Melbourne in 2009:

“This view that the Almighty considers women to be inferior to men is not restricted to one religion or tradition. Its influence does not stop at the walls of the church, mosque, synagogue, or temple. Women are prevented from playing a full and equal role in many faiths, creating an environment in which violations against women are justified.

The truth is that male religious leaders have had – and still have – an option to interpret holy teachings either to exalt or subjugate women. They have, for their own selfish ends, overwhelmingly chosen the latter.

Their continuing choice provides the foundation or justification for much of the pervasive persecution and abuse of women throughout the world. This is in clear violation not just of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, Moses and the prophets, Muhammad, and founders of other great religions - all of whom have called for proper and equitable treatment of all the children of God. It is time we had the courage to challenge these views and set a new course that demands equal rights for women and men, girls and boys.

Recently I presented my concerns to a group of fellow leaders known as The Elders, who represent practicing Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and Hindus. We are no longer active in politics and are free to express our honest opinions. We decided to draw particular attention to the role of religious and traditional leaders in obstructing the campaign for equality and human rights, and promulgated a statement that declares: "the justification of discrimination against women and girls on grounds of religion or tradition, as if it were prescribed by a Higher Authority, is unacceptable."

You can read the entire speech here:

http://www.cartercenter.org/news/editorials_speeches/parliament-world-religions-120309.html

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