To the Federal Government:

I am pleased that the Federal government is taking the freedom of religion and belief seriously and have released the Religious Discrimination Bill. I would like to voice my concerns regarding the Bill.

I am worried that the proposed Bill treats matters of faith and conscience as mere “exemptions” to the law rather than positive rights in and of themselves. This does not guarantee that our rights to practice what we believe, whether it be due to our religion or conscience, is fully protected.

Will the Bill protect freedom of speech so that a statement of religious belief would not be grounds for a complaint of discrimination? I have a concern with Clause 41(2) that provides that any statement of belief that is likely to “vilify” another person or group of persons will not be protected by Clause 41(1). What does “likely to vilify” mean? Does an insult or a criticism or even reading a bible verse fall under “likely to vilify” and therefore bring on a claim of discrimination? The threshold is very low and does not offer protection!

Will the Bill protect the right of parents to “ensure the religious and moral education of their children are in conformity with their own convictions”? To do so, the Bill must also protect the right of religious institutions and faith-based schools to employ staffs who align with their beliefs and ethos. Any other model would create chaos and confusion in staff administration and the education of their children.

Will the Bill protect the rights of parents who have their children in state schools – to opt their children out from classes that they may object to (due to religious beliefs) for example, explicit sex education?

Does the Bill protect both individuals and religion-based groups from discrimination on the grounds of their belief or activity? Example – nativity scene will only have Mary as a female and Joseph as a male. This (true) portrayal of the Holy Family should not be deemed discriminatory.

Does the Bill protect religious-based activities such as distributing Bibles at a street corner whilst reading from the Bible? That should not be deem as vilification. What about faith-filled outreach groups providing community support, for example, Christmas carolling at aged care home followed by a reading from the Bible on the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ? These practices should be protected.

Does the Bill protect Chaplains such as Pastor/Priest, Rabbi from discrimination where services are provided at public centres such as public hospitals? It should protect them.

Another concern is granting more power to the Australian Human Rights Commission to rule on discrimination complaints. How do I know that those appointed will be fair and not be misguided by political agendas and popular trends that do not reflect my belief and conscience?

I would like to see the government work to ensure that the above concerns are considered in the proposed Bill.

Thank you for your consideration and attention.