

Shutting out the 'sinners' feeds bigotry

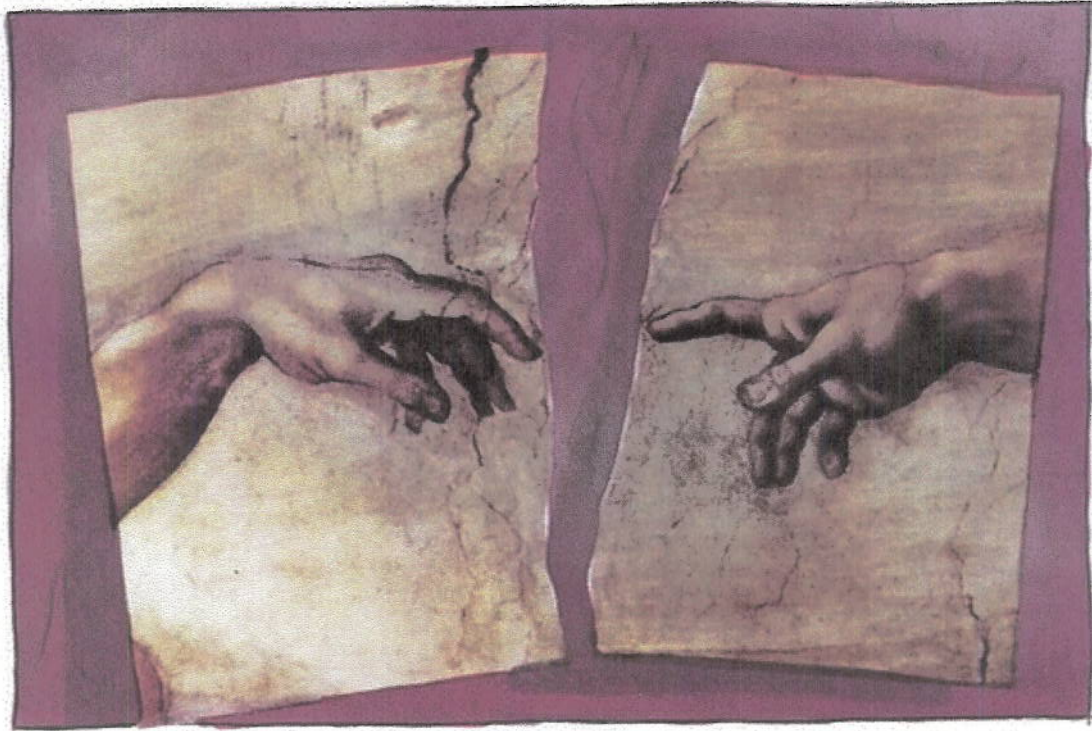


Illustration: Matt Golding.

Allowing religious organisations to discriminate undermines the true meaning of faith.

When the federal government assures religious groups they will have the freedom to discriminate against homosexuals and others they deem sinners (*The Age* 16/1), it not only undermines the rights of already vulnerable groups, such as same-sex-attracted people, it also undermines the substance and integrity of religion by reducing it to a collection of petty bigotries.

Placing restrictions on the rights of faith-based organisations to discriminate against those who do not comply with or embody their view of religious doctrine is not an attack on the freedom of religious belief.

In allowing religious organisations to discriminate, it is not religion that is protected but the institutionalisation of conservative religious forces who no longer have a meaningful moral vision of what it means to be a person of faith in today's society.

The government has privileged an extremely conservative reading of faith that is problematic. It is increasingly a minority view: it does not represent the breadth and depth of religious thought and debate within religious communities about issues of sin and sexuality.

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In representing this move as a protection of religious freedom, the government appears to suggest that an aversion to human diversity is fundamental to the practice of faith.

This view of religion imagines an intolerant, misogynist and homophobic God at the centre of faith. This strikes at the very heart of the long and honourable history all religions have of working and caring for the disenfranchised. I believe the vast majority of people of faith do not want their religion used to estrange people from our society and affect their livelihood.

It seems to me that refusing people employment on the basis of their identity when it bears no relationship to

the job they are applying for is a deeply punitive measure to take in the name of protecting religious beliefs. It targets people in an intensely personal way, to the very core of their identity.

Perhaps more fundamental than any other matter is the fact people whom the religious conservatives deem to be undesirables or sinners, such as divorcees, sole parents, and same-sex-attracted people, can also identify as religious. There is a significant reform movement in all religions around the world to increase the rights of these groups and to have them recognised as equally legitimate co-religionists.

Allowing religious conservatives the right to discriminate in the name of religion silences and renders invisible those of us seeking to reform the practices of exclusion, division and domination in religion. It damns progressive religious forces to irrelevance and obscurity and denies us the very freedoms we want in the practice of our faith.

Historically and even today, there is a great deal of personal, cultural and political excess in the interpretation and practice of faith. That excess has often been institutionalised into our religious structures and has been normalised.

Religious conservatives have benefited enormously from this, and used it to overstate their influence and the representativeness of their views. They have treated religion as their own moral playground in which others must play by their rules. The government has tacitly supported this oppressive reign.

I am not against the right of religious organisations to discriminate in whom they employ and to positively discriminate in favour of those who can most further the purpose of the organisation.

But if the purpose of the organisation is education and/or welfare provision, and public funds are used in the administration of that service, then the right to discriminate must have significant limitations and should be subject to oversight. It should not be easy to deny someone a service or potentially a livelihood because of who they are.

To banish people from religious institutions because they do not comply with our view of who belongs in our religious flock should be deeply troubling to us and should not be done with any ease of mind or heart and, most certainly, should not be done on our behalf by the state.

I believe in Australia's commitment to diversity and human dignity, and I do not want any tear in that fabric in my name as a person of faith.

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