

Independent Order of Benedictines



**IOB**

Peace Prayer Work

## **Submission: Opposition to the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2024 [Provisions]**

**Introduction:** The Independent Order of Benedictines is a religious charity dedicated to service, faith, and education. We express our concerns regarding the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2024, focusing on its potential impact on religious freedom, public discourse, and charity operations.

### **Key Concerns:**

- 1. Impact on Religious Freedom and Dialogue:** As a religious organization, we are deeply concerned that the Bill could inhibit the free expression of religious beliefs. The broad powers granted to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to regulate content considered “misinformation” could potentially limit religious teachings or interpretations that challenge mainstream perspectives. This risks infringing upon the constitutionally protected right to religious freedom. It is vital that the Bill explicitly protects the expression of religious beliefs and ensures that faith-based discourse is not wrongfully classified as misinformation.
- 2. Suppression of Charitable Activities and Outreach:** The Bill may negatively impact the way charities communicate with the public, particularly on sensitive topics related to health, spirituality, and moral teachings. Many religious charities provide crucial support through moral and ethical guidance, which may conflict with mainstream views. If this communication is regulated or restricted under the Bill, it could hinder our ability to offer help and guidance to those in need. The Bill should offer specific exemptions for charitable and religious communications to prevent unintended restrictions on outreach.
- 3. Risk to Free Speech and Civil Discourse:** We believe the Bill poses a threat to open public dialogue by giving ACMA extensive powers to control and regulate speech, potentially stifling important discussions on moral, ethical, and social issues. Religious communities often engage in debates that explore complex issues, and while these discussions may challenge prevailing narratives, they are essential for fostering understanding and reflection. The Bill should include robust protections for civil discourse and religious viewpoints, ensuring that freedom of expression is not curtailed.
- 4. Lack of Provisions for Appeals and Oversight:** The Bill currently grants significant enforcement powers without sufficient checks and balances, particularly in terms of appeals or oversight mechanisms. This could lead to arbitrary enforcement of misinformation rules, affecting religious organizations and charities disproportionately. We recommend including clear and transparent appeal processes to ensure that any decisions made under the Bill are fair, especially when they affect charitable or religious groups.

### **Recommendations for Addressing Issues:**

- 1. Religious and Charitable Exemptions:** Amend the Bill to include explicit exemptions for religious speech and charity-driven communications to safeguard freedom of religious expression and ensure that outreach efforts are not constrained.
- 2. Protections for Civil Discourse:** Introduce provisions that protect civil and faith-based discussions, especially on moral, ethical, and social issues, from being classified as misinformation.

Wisdom Statement

*“All of us have to keep an eye on the compass and correct our course so that our goal is brought back to profit for the other.”*

By St Benedict of Nursia

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**3. Appeal and Review Mechanisms:** Establish clear, accessible appeal and oversight mechanisms for decisions made by ACMA, ensuring that religious organizations and charities have a fair opportunity to contest any decisions that may affect their operations.

**Conclusion:** We respectfully urge the Senate to reconsider the provisions of this Bill and its potential impact on religious freedom, charitable work, and free speech. By revising the Bill to include safeguards for religious expression and charitable outreach, the government can better balance the need to combat misinformation with the preservation of fundamental rights.

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