

Christians in Australia are not persecuted, and it is insulting to argue they are

Written by Robyn J. Whitaker, Bromby Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies, Trinity College, University of Divinity

As Australians wait to hear the [government's response](#) to the Ruddock review of religious freedom (and indeed, the content of the report itself), it is worth considering exactly how the two intersect in this largely secular society.

Australia has neither constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom nor a bill or charter of rights, leaving us with complex and diverse laws governing these issues.

Discussion of religious freedoms is an important conversation to have and not one that should be hijacked by inflammatory rhetoric. Yet, much like the marriage equality debate that sparked the review, that is the danger we face.

Read more: [Australia needs a better conversation about religious freedom](#)

In February this year, the new head of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), Martyn Iles, [said](#) :

There's never been more pressure on people of faith and on the church simply for living out our timeless convictions.

Historically, this is simply untrue. At an earlier address at ACL's national conference last December, Iles [quoted](#) Matthew 5:10:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

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In doing so, he painted the work of ACL as “righteous” and framed their experience as a persecuted people. I do not wish to single out Iles, but rather point to a kind of Christianity, epitomised by the rhetoric of evangelicals in the US, that sees itself as persecuted and engaged in a power struggle for morality.

The power balance has indeed shifted. Suddenly, many conservative Christians find themselves on the losing side of a debate, often for the first time in their lives (or at least since abortion).

Yet the response is not to cry “persecution” at the first sign of disagreement nor to embrace an “us” and “them” approach that digs in defensively and perceives difference as attack.

Claiming there is a [“war” on Christianity](#) does not foster the dialogue needed to be able to discuss important issues with nuance, compassion and intelligence.

The rhetoric of persecution evokes a mythology associated with the earliest centuries of Christianity. Christians were initially a minority group in the Roman Empire, where they did encounter sporadic hostilities. Graphic stories survive of the bravery of Christian martyrs who were condemned to be burnt alive, eaten by wild beasts, or face other tortures by the state. Martyrs such as Polycarp and [Perpetua](#) were celebrated as heroes of the faith for their courage in the face of savage punishments.

While such persecution was only occasionally systematic, the sense of being a persecuted minority has persisted in Christianity, despite centuries of Christian dominance. It has become a rhetorical convenience for those in the West who feel their lifestyle, power or religion is under threat.

Let us be clear: Christians in Australia are not being persecuted. They have the freedom to gather and worship freely, to meet in public places, to join the army, to teach, to vote, and to be prime minister. Christians own and run vast institutions. They are still the largest religious affiliation in the country (at 52% in the 2016 census). These are hardly the signs of a persecuted group.

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To claim persecution is not just historically inaccurate, it is offensive on at least two levels in the current context.

First, there are Christians (and people of all religions) actually being persecuted for their religious beliefs in other parts of the world.

As recently as last Christmas, [nine Coptic Christians were gunned down](#) in Egypt while at church. Their lives contribute to a death tally of almost 100 Christians killed in Egypt throughout 2017, many while simply attending church for religious festivals.

Being [discovered a Christian in North Korea](#) is considered hostile to the state and often results in time in a forced labour camp. It is equally life-threatening to be a Christian in Afghanistan, Somalia, parts of Sudan, Libya and Pakistan, to name only a few countries where such threats exist. Simply [owning a Bible](#) in some parts of the world is a liability to one's life.

In Australia, it is Muslims and Jews who suffer the most discrimination or persecution on religious grounds.

The second objection relates to the context in which such rhetoric occurs. Christians and some [conservative commentators](#) are claiming persecution for expressing their opinions against same-sex marriage.

I have no doubt that some Christians have experienced social hostility, legal action, or verbal abuse for what has been [revealed to be a minority view](#) in light of changes to the Marriage Act. Most of these examples of vilification occurred during the 2017 debate. While unfortunate, they are nothing like the kind of violence, real and psychological, that LGBTIQ people have suffered at the hands of Christians.

The Christian church has a terrible track record toward LGBTIQ people. Hate speech and abusive conversion “therapies” have been used by Christians against the LGBTIQ community. Even churches that consider themselves moderate cannot underestimate the effect on

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someone's mental health of subtly yet consistently being told there is something "wrong" with them for their sexuality. Yet that is what many churches have either actively preached or communicated in non-verbal ways.

Read more: [Labor is right to block 'religious freedom' amendments to protect same-sex marriage bill](#)

And while some Christians fear job loss over their opinions, the weight of current evidence is that the people who have actually [lost their jobs](#) are those who have been [LGBTIQ](#) or allies.

Of course, some Christians have been at the forefront of fighting for equality. Many Christians are LGBTIQ themselves, and some are calling for [an apology](#) from the church. But, as a whole, the Christian community is responsible for a huge amount of damage done in the name of religious belief. We should be saying sorry, not crying persecution.

Confusing persecution with marginalisation or disagreement is insulting to the thousands around our world who face actual daily persecution because of their religion or ethnicity. It is insulting to the men, women and children who have been hurt by the church because of their sexuality or gender.

There is an important conversation to be had about what kind of community Australia wants to be in terms of religious tolerance, freedom and genuine diversity. But, please, let's leave the rhetorical hyperbole at home.

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