



**Australian  
Human Rights  
Commission**

*everyone, everywhere, everyday*

## Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Please fill out all the sections that apply to you. Items marked with an asterisk (\*) are compulsory; you must fill them out for the submission to be complete.**

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Mark here if this is a group submission:

Organisation Name: Australian Bahá'í Community

Organisation Address: 173 Mona Vale Road

Suburb or Town: Ingleside

Postcode: 2101

If this is a group submission, briefly describe the objectives and activities or affiliation of your organisation.

The Australian Bahá'í Community consists of members in all parts of the country who come together to worship and carry out community development activities. The Bahá'í community strives to be a model of a peaceful and just society by promoting and learning to apply such principles as the oneness of humanity, oneness of religion, elimination of prejudice, and equality of the sexes. We believe that an equal standard of human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, must be recognised and adopted for all humanity.

Approximately how many members are in your organisation?

There are 17,000 enrolled members of the Australian Bahá'í Community. Many other people of diverse backgrounds participate in our activities.

Is your organisation affiliated with or associated with any religious or interfaith or civil or community organisations?

The Australian Bahá'í Community is affiliated with the Bahá'í International Community (BIC), an international non-governmental organisation with affiliates in over 180 countries and territories, which together represent over 5 million members of the Bahá'í Faith. As an international NGO, the BIC interacts and cooperates with the United Nations, its specialised agencies, with governments, as well as with inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations.

The Australian Bahá'í Community is also a member of the following national organisations and networks:

Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO)  
Australian Forum of Human Rights Organisations (AFHRO)

WomenSpeak Network  
Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS)  
Asia-Pacific Breakthrough (Women, Faith and Development) Steering Group

At state and local level, the Bahá'í community is affiliated with a wide range of organisations.

Is your organisation an interfaith organisation?

No

Have you participated in any interfaith service or activity during 2007/2008? If so, give details.

Yes. Members of the Australian Bahá'í Community participate in many interfaith activities. Most recently our community was represented at the Interfaith Summit for Peace and Harmony in Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region, held in Brisbane, and the National Day of Mourning following the bushfires in Victoria.

Is there an interfaith body in your area, either locally or regionally? Please give the name and location.

n/a

Did you participate in any of the group consultations held in all states and territories for this report?

Yes. Representatives of the Australian Bahá'í Community have participated in the consultations held in several states and the Northern Territory.

**This next section outlines the seven areas that the report is exploring, and provides research questions to contextualise the topic and serve as a prompt. These areas and the questions are a guide only, and respondents should not feel limited by these.**

## **1 Evaluation of 1998 HREOC Report on Article 18: Freedom of Religion and Belief**

This is to evaluate the impact of the report, and assess changes in the social climate between 1998 and the present. *Article 18: Freedom of Religion and Belief* surveyed Australian federal, state and territory legislation as it related to the practice and expression of religion, faith and spirituality. The major issues were religious expression, discrimination on the ground of religion or belief and incitement to religious hatred.

The full report and an overview of major issues can be found at:

[www.humanrights.gov.au/human\\_rights/religion/index.html#Article](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/religion/index.html#Article)

1. What are areas of concern regarding the freedom to practice and express faith and beliefs, within your faith community and other such communities?

The Australian Bahá'í Community thanks the Australian Human Rights Commission for commissioning the report on Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Just on 60 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrined the fundamental right of every human being to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The initial decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, has witnessed widespread violations of this right. Fuelled by religious extremism, people in many countries suffer persistent intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, the proliferation of violence in the name of religion, the manipulation of religion in the interest of political ideology, and increasing tensions between religion and the policies of the Nation-State.

A re-examination of this universal right, its role in human development and the means for its protection is extremely timely.

The Australian Bahá'í Community affirms that the freedom of hold beliefs of one's choosing, to practice them and to change them is central to human development. To search for meaning is an essential part of being human.

In this context, we would like to put forward four critical issues associated with this right:

1. the right to change one's religion or beliefs
2. the right to manifest one's religion or religion in teaching, practice, worship and observance

3. the responsibilities of national governments and the international community vis-à-vis marginalized and peacefully organised religious communities
4. the responsibilities of religious leaders and religious communities in promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion and belief and human rights more broadly.

In particular, the rights to change one's religion or belief and to manifest one's religion or belief (including by teaching) should be made explicit in any new legislative measures intended to protect freedom of religion and belief.

The appropriate standard of protection for religion and belief is, in our view, that set out in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and we recommend this standard be embodied in Australian law:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

Some Nation-States challenge the freedom to change one's religion and some challenge the right to teach one's faith. It is important that Australia affirm these rights, as this helps to protect religious freedom in other countries, as well as in Australia.

2. Have new issues emerged since this report was published in 1998 relating to expression of faith?

Since 1998 religion has become a subject of major political and social importance in virtually all parts of the world.

In Australia, the past decade has witnessed increasing religious pluralism. As the discussion paper points out, "we are more diverse than ever before and this diversity challenges current understandings of freedom of religion and belief."

Australia's increasing diversity naturally gives rise to the challenge of maintaining social cohesion and national unity. The Australian Bahá'í Community firmly believes that our nation's response to this challenge must be guided by the principle of unity grounded in the peaceful accommodation of diversity and respect for universal human rights. Australia should continue to embrace a plurality of identities and beliefs, gathered together under the canopy of just laws and operating within a human rights framework, as the foundation for a cohesive and prosperous society.

At the international level, in the period since 1998 we have witnessed a significant increase in violence and conflict in the name of religion. We believe that incitement to violence, extremism, or hatred in the name of religion must be acknowledged as a serious problem, forcefully sanctioned and unreservedly condemned by government and religious leaders alike if we are to safeguard Australian citizens from the influences of religious fanaticism.

3. Is there adequate protection against discrimination based on religion or belief, and protection of ability to discriminate in particular contexts?

The right to freedom of religion or belief is under threat in many countries. There is a tendency to treat the right to freedom of religion or belief as less important than certain other civil and political rights and this right is often treated as a 'second class citizen' in the sphere of human rights. People do not wish to be involved in religious dialogues as the definition of religion itself is contested. Problems also arise when focusing on the major world's religions as this can leave out smaller, less established faith communities. Given the interdependence of human rights, violations of this right have compromised many other rights.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1998 paper, *Article 18*, thoroughly reviewed the protection of the right to freedom of religion and belief under Australian law, including protection against discrimination based on religion or belief. The paper examined the Australia Constitution and relevant federal, State and Territory laws. It found that:

*Most Australians may not experience discrimination on the basis of religion and belief but many do. Some Australians are protected from discrimination on the basis of religion and belief by State and Territory laws but many others are not. Laws providing protection from discrimination on the basis of religion and belief are patchwork across Australia.*

Despite the changes in some State and Territory legislation that have occurred in the past decade, we believe that this finding remains true.

While members of our own community report only occasional and isolated incidents of religious discrimination in Australia, we recognise that for some other communities, such discrimination has become more frequent and widespread in the past ten years. Accordingly we support the Commission's previous conclusion that "to comply with international human rights commitments Australia should enact federal legislation to make unlawful in Australia discrimination on the basis of religion and belief." This legislation could be part of the *Religious Freedom Act* the Commission recommended to be enacted by the Commonwealth Parliament. Further prohibition of discrimination should be coupled with explicit recognition of the rights set out in article 18 of the Universal Declaration.

The Australian Bahá'í Community supports exemptions from such legislation in employment based on the inherent requirements of a particular job. More general exemptions should not, however, be permitted as these would undermine the spirit and intention of the law.

4. How are federal and state and territory governments managing incitement to religious hatred, and the question of control and responsibility?

The Australian Bahá'í Community supports the attempts that have been made by some governments to legislate in relation to incitement to religious hatred. It is the setting up of just laws, which uphold the dignity and equal rights of all, believers and non-believers alike, that provides the surest foundation for a peaceful and prosperous society. An independent judiciary is a vital component in the process of effectively adjudicating cases concerning incitement of religious hatred.

We believe, however, that legislation is not enough. Alongside states, religious leaders bear a great responsibility for the prevention of defamatory practices and hate speech and acts. By word and example, religious leaders must guide their followers to a peaceful coexistence with those who think and behave differently.

Ultimately, any long-term preventive strategy to address religious hatred must be rooted in efforts to educate children and adults alike, equipping them with skills and opportunities to learn about other systems of belief. Within a culture of education, people who can read the writings of their own religion as well as those of others, who are free to question and discuss, and who are able to participate in the generation and application of knowledge, will be better prepared to resist and counter the forces that would incite religious hatred.

## **2 Religion and the State – the Constitution, roles and responsibilities**

This is about assessing existing legislative protection of freedom of religion and belief, and its practice and expression in Australia, as expressed in the Constitution. Within this, what are the roles and responsibilities of spiritual and civil societies and do these need to be codified in law?

Section 116 of the Commonwealth of Australian Constitution Act states that:

*The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.*

### **2.1 The Constitution**

1. Is this section of the Constitution an adequate protection of freedom of religion and belief?

As the Commission pointed out in its *Article 18* report, “the Commonwealth Constitution does not provide a complete guarantee of protection for the right to freedom of religion and belief.” Section 116 restricts only the legislative powers of the Commonwealth and falls far short of providing positive protection to the rights of the individual to freedom of religion and belief.

2. How should the Australian Government protect freedom of religion and belief?

The Australian Bahá’í Community is generally supportive of legal reform to strengthen the protection of freedom of religion and belief, such as the Commission’s previous recommendation for the passage of a Religious Freedom Act by the Commonwealth Parliament. We consider that the law should address at least three issues:

- Explicit legal recognition of the right to freedom of religion and belief as set out in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (including the right to change one’s religion);
- Prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief
- Prohibition of incitement to religious hatred or violence

We believe that any such laws should be premised on the protection of the rights of the individual, rather than the rights of a religion *per se*. At the international level, the concept of the “defamation of religions” has distorted the international human rights framework and challenged human rights machinery. The result has been selective restriction of the space for peaceful public exploration and debate



of belief-related issues, which is desperately needed in today's world. Australia should not go down the same path.

While legal reform is important, however, legal mechanisms alone will not engender the commitment and mutual understanding required to sustain a culture of peaceful co-existence and respect for diverse beliefs.

As noted above, we believe the greatest safeguard is a long-term preventive strategy rooted in educational efforts.

3. When considering the separation of religion and state, are there any issues that presently concern you?

While supporting the principle of separation of religion and state in a multi-faith society, we believe that religious communities and the state have a duty to cooperate with each other, in an environment of tolerance and friendship between all religious beliefs, for the welfare of the community as a whole.

The unique contribution to be made by the religious communities is to voice the need for the spiritual aspects of life not to be neglected by society. The health of the community depends on achieving a balance between spiritual and material aspirations, and it is unhealthy for the processes of government to be regarded as a purely material pursuit.

Religious communities have historically played a significant and ongoing role in promoting human rights, including teaching the fundamental moral equality of all human beings, which is the foundation stone of human rights. It is particularly important that people of faith and their religious communities continue to be engaged in actively supporting human rights.

Members of religious communities are equal citizens with others, and in this capacity they have both a responsibility and a right to contribute to a peaceful, harmonious and prosperous community that respects the rights of all its members.

4. Do religious or faith-based groups have undue influence over government and/or does the government have undue influence over religious or faith based groups?

The Bahá'í community believes that an open and transparent dialogue and consultation between religious communities, people of faith as individuals, and government (in the context of other democratic interactions between civil society and government) is appropriate and contributes positively to social welfare. Clearly it would not be appropriate for any religious community to seek through government to impose its religious views on others. This would be fundamentally

inconsistent with freedom of religion and belief. We have no reason to believe that any religious community is in fact exercising such influence.

5. Would a legislated national Charter of Rights add to these freedoms of religion and belief?

We consider that the right to freedom of religion and belief, as set out in the Universal Declaration, should be enshrined in law. A natural context in which this could occur is a Charter of Rights. Further, the adoption of such a Charter is a reasonable and sensible measure for the promotion and protection of human rights.

In the view of the Australian Bahá'í Community, enshrining the principle of freedom of religion and belief in a Charter of Rights would add to religious freedom. It would represent and promote a societal aspiration for the protection of religious freedom and other human rights and its influence would be positive (as, for instance, in the case of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself). It would also add to a citizen's ability to protect their religious freedom by appeal to that legislative principle.

Noting, however, the widespread misunderstanding and occasional concern that discussion of a Bill of Rights or Charter of Rights provokes, the Australian Bahá'í Community considers that the adoption of such a Charter will be far more effective and long lasting if it is pursued in a manner that attracts widespread community support and if it enjoys the support of all major political parties within Australia. Partisanship on questions of human rights greatly weakens their protection. We urge that non-partisan pathways be explored and pursued to build a consensus for promotion and protection within Australia of all human rights for all.

We recognise that a Charter of Rights is, in itself, insufficient to ensure the protection of human rights. To be fully effective a Charter should, in our view, be coupled with effective human rights education so that individuals know their rights, and are able to effectively share in building a culture of human rights.

## **2.2 Roles and responsibilities**

6. a) What are the roles, rights and responsibilities of religious, spiritual and civil society (including secular) organisations in implementing the commitment to freedom of religion and belief?

We believe that religious leaders have a particular obligation to uphold universal principles of freedom of religion or belief. In a world harassed by violence and conflict in the name of religion, the leaders of our religious communities bear tremendous responsibility for guiding their followers towards a peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding with those who think and believe differently.

- b) How should this be managed?

By their words and their example, religious leaders must uphold the sacred nature of the human conscience and unreservedly accord each individual, both within and beyond their communities, the freedom to search for truth.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is necessarily contingent on exposure to new ideas and the ability to share and receive information. In the past, religious institutions have too often been the chief agents in discouraging exploration of reality and the exercise of those intellectual faculties that distinguish humankind. In this way, believing masses have been left exposed and vulnerable to misinformation about their own faith as well as the beliefs of others.

Instead, religious leaders should actively encourage their followers in the pursuit of knowledge and peaceful dialogue, as this is the best counter to fanaticism. By eliminating ignorance of other religions, the latent causes of intolerance can be addressed.

Religious leaders also bear a great responsibility for the prevention of defamatory statements and practices and, where necessary, for enabling those who have been defamed the right of reply.

7. How can these organisations model a cooperative approach in responding to issues of freedom of religion and belief?

With the growing strength of interfaith relationships in Australia in recent years, our religious leaders have a sound basis to view themselves as partners in the creation of a culture of peace and respect for human rights and dignity.

Many Australian religious leaders and organizations have already demonstrated the capacity to work together on issues of common concern, such as reconciliation and climate change. The operation of collective bodies such as the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations and the Australian National

Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews provide an early model of the kind of cooperative approach that can be taken in responding to issues of freedom of religion and belief.

Organisations such as the Australian Human Rights Commission are well placed to foster increased dialogue on the role and responsibility of faith organizations in promoting religious harmony and freedom in the community.

8. How well established and comprehensive is the commitment to interfaith understanding and inclusion in Australia at present and where should it go from here?

The Bahá'í community has been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities in Australia. We acknowledge the many religious leaders and lay people from all faiths who have stepped forward to participate in interfaith initiatives and the building of interfaith understanding in Australia.

The interfaith circle must, however, be broadened and deepened.

To broaden the circle, we would encourage those who have, for whatever reason, been reticent to engage in this area to date, to give their wholehearted support to their counterparts who are coming together in the effort to help build a peaceful world.

We believe that interfaith discourse, if it is to continue to deepen and contribute meaningfully to healing the ills of humanity, must begin to address the implications of the over-arching truth that called the movement into being: that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one. We believe that a growing number of people are coming to realize this truth and that religious leadership must support their efforts if it is to continue to have meaning in the twenty-first century and beyond. Acceptance of the principle that all religions are, in their very essence, different aspects of one underlying truth would significantly weaken efforts to foster hatred between different religious communities.

9. How should we understand the changing role and face of religion, nationally and internationally?

The religions and faiths of the world, with which the majority of the earth's inhabitants stand identified, have imparted a vast spiritual, moral and civilisational legacy. It is natural that they will continue to succor and guide their followers and the societies of which they form part, particularly in troubled times like the present, when the negative consequences of excessive materialism are increasingly evident. Religion lifts our vision beyond purely material conceptions of reality to embrace higher notions of

justice, reconciliation, love and selflessness in service of the common good. It assists us to see human beings – in the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – as endowed with “dignity and rights,” and helps us define a relationship of love with them, irrespective of their material, racial, social, national or other background.

### **3 Religion and the State - practice and expression**

The emergence of a multifaith Australia has brought issues regarding religious expression to the fore in debates, politically and culturally. This area is about balancing the expectations of faith-based organisations with civil society organisations.

2. How should government accommodate the needs of faith groups in addressing issues such as religion and education, faith schools, the building of places of worship, religious holy days, religious symbols and religious dress practices?

Given that Australians hold increasingly diverse religious beliefs, we believe that there should be no hierarchy of religion in a secular society, and that it is not appropriate for any religion to be accorded special treatment or status by the state.

In a religiously plural society, it must also be acknowledged that obligations inherent to a particular religious community are not binding on persons who are not part of that group unless the content of such obligations corresponds to internationally agreed-upon human rights.

3. Is current legislation on burial practice and autopsy practice adequate? Are any other of your religious practices inhibited by law, procedural practice or policy (i.e. education or health)?

Bahá'í law requires that burial should take place within an hour's travel time from the place of death. The spirit of this law is for the deceased to be buried as near as possible to the place where death occurred. There is no provision as to the time limit before burial, but the sooner it takes place, the more fitting and preferable. Embalming of the body is to be avoided, but is permitted where there is a legal requirement, as is autopsy.

Generally speaking there has not been conflict between Bahá'í burial law and Australian law and practices. We note, however, that cremation is not permitted by Bahá'í law. As appropriate sites for burial become increasingly scarce in Australian cities, it will be important for Bahá'ís to continue to be able to choose burial rather than cremation, in accordance with their religious beliefs. This principle extends to children who have died *in utero*. As Bahá'ís believe the soul is present from the moment of conception, such remains should be treated with respect and should not be incinerated if this can be prevented. Similarly, the remains of Bahá'ís who are autopsied or who choose to leave their body to medical science should be treated with respect, should not be cremated, and should be buried not more than one hour's journey from the place of death whenever possible.

## **4 Security issues in the aftermath of September 11**

In response to the events of September 11, 2001, the federal and state governments enacted changes to existing legislation and introduced new legislation. The changes were introduced to better protect Australia from the threat of terrorism, both internally and externally. This section seeks to assess the impact of the legislative changes on religious and ethnic communities and determine if cultural identity and freedom to publicly express or act in accordance with beliefs has been affected.

### **2. How should the Government balance physical security and civil liberties?**

It is important not to retreat into outmoded notions of cultural homogeneity and ideological uniformity as a prerequisite or guarantor of peace and security. While unity should be one of the foremost principles, it must be grounded in the peaceful accommodation of cultural diversity. Australia should continue to embrace its plurality of identities and beliefs, gathered together under the canopy of just laws and human rights, as the foundation for a cohesive and prosperous future. It is essential that the government, in protecting the physical security of the people in its care, does not behave in a manner that violates the rights of the individual.

### **4. a) Is there religious radicalism and political extremism in Australia? b) If so, what are the risks to Australia?**

It would be unrealistic to believe that Australia is immune to the religious extremism that has, in so many parts of the world, demonstrated itself to be a major obstacle in the processes of peace. We believe that religious extremism – of which women often bear the greatest burden - needs to be acknowledged and forcefully condemned by government and religious leaders alike.

Interaction with people of different faiths is important to strengthen appreciation of diverse religious traditions as well as helping individuals to recognise the shared humanity of all people. Without such interaction, other religions remain shrouded in mystery and it is easy for them to become the object of ignorant fears and fantasies. Accordingly, we would welcome government support for interfaith initiatives at local, state and national levels as a pro-active strategy for reducing the appeal of religious extremism.

## **5 The interface of religious, political and cultural aspirations**

This area is seeking to research and map the current relationships that exist between religious, political, cultural and indigenous groups and what they seek to achieve. It is about describing the interaction of these groups within contemporary Australian society.

### 3. How do you perceive gender in faith communities?

The Australian Bahá'í Community upholds and works to promote the principle of equality of men and women. The oppression of women in the name of religion is a grave injustice and we believe that society has a responsibility to work for the removal of gender based violation of human rights, irrespective of their origin.

### 4. Do you believe there is equality of gender in faith communities?

As in other parts of society, gender equality is in evolutionary development within faith communities.

### 5. What do you think should be the relationship between the right to gender equality and the right to religious freedom in Australia?

The fundamental equality of women and men is a moral principle and an article of international law. We believe that all governments, including the Australian government, must consistently uphold this principle and condemn actions, taken in the name of religion, which deny human dignity and freedom of conscience to women.

### 6. Citizenship and Australian values have emerged as central issues, how do you balance integration and cultural preservation?

The founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, taught that "The Earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens." Viewed from this perspective the issues of citizenship become issues of service to humanity as a whole, and our cultural diversity is seen as an enrichment rather than a threat to our community. In other words it is perfectly possible to envisage a society in which there is "unity in diversity".



8. Is there a role for religious voices, alongside others in the policy debates of the nation?

Yes. As stated above, we believe that religious communities and individuals have a responsibility to contribute to the well-being of societies of which they form a part. A healthy pattern of interaction would engage religious communities in the shared task of improving societal well-being.

The Bahá'í community eschews involvement in partisan politics. Accordingly the Bahá'í community seeks to ensure it plays no role in the democratic decision of the individual as to how they should cast their vote, who should be elected as a representative in parliament, or who should form the government at any particular time. Nonetheless, collectively and as individuals, Bahá'ís believe we have a responsibility to contribute to the welfare and positive development of society.

The Bahá'í community also considers that government based purely on materialistic considerations, which neglects the spiritual nature of the human person, results in unbalanced development which generally harms the weakest members of society – whether the poor, members of racial minorities, the aged, disabled or others. Material development, unbalanced by spiritual development can cause significant harm to society, as amply demonstrated by the history of the twentieth century.

The most important force for positive social development is love for humanity. Faith based groups have a positive role to play in promoting, in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “a spirit of brotherhood”, and in advocating for the welfare of any member of the human family who suffers violations of their rights.

## **6 Technology and its implications**

The present day has seen, and continues to witness unprecedented technological changes, particularly in the area of communication. This report seeks to identify and analyse some of the significant impacts of these developments.

1. How have the new technologies affected the practice and dissemination of religious and faith communities?

There is no doubt that the Internet is dramatically reshaping patterns of communication and information sharing. The rise of new forms of collaboration, social outreach and creative expression, through new communities of interaction that are typically global in nature, has tremendous potential to build bonds and understanding between members of the human family, both within and across faith communities, leading to true cooperative action towards peace and human well-being.

New online social networks, in particular, provide mechanisms of connection and information sharing among individuals and groups that can engender a sense of community and shared identity, foster new personal bonds, exert social and moral influence, and promote mutual goals and interests.

While the potential of new technologies to advance mutual understanding and cooperation between people of all faith traditions is therefore vast, it must be recognised that online interactions do carry potential dangers. Prudence and good judgment should always be observed, and special measures may be required to ensure the protection of children and young people in on-line environments.

2. Has new technology had an impact on your religion and/or your religious practice?

The Australian Bahá'í Community has found new technology to be an effective vehicle for promoting dialogue, study and reflection about religious matters, and for serving others. The use of Web sites, blogs, social networks, multimedia presentations, discussion fora and other Internet tools has enabled us to share information and insights from our Faith with our fellow citizens in ways that were not previously possible.

New technology has enabled us to reach out in new ways to members of our community and others living in remote and regional areas, who were previously isolated due to distance. We have also used new technology to streamline our internal administrative processes, making them more prompt and efficient.

5. What impact do the media have on the free practice of religion in Australia and the balanced portrayal of religious beliefs and practice?

The sacred Writings of our Faith describe the media as “the mirror of the world ... a mirror endowed with hearing, sight and speech” and “potent phenomenon.” Given the immense power wielded by major media outlets, however, those who work for them are obliged to approach their task with justice and equity, so that the subject is reflected accurately and not distorted.

Over the years the Australian Bahá'í Community has appreciated being the subject of accurate and sensitive reporting in the press, radio and television, particularly by specialist reporters on religion as in the ABC religion unit and elsewhere. Balanced and accurate portrayal of religious beliefs and practice can play an important role in building understanding and social cohesion. Given the centrality of religion to many issues in the world today, we would support the allocation of increased resources to support the work of specialist reporters in this field.

Conversely, of course, we have seen that the negative impact of inflammatory and ill-informed reporting on religion can also be profound. Public misconceptions, once created, are extremely difficult to dispel. We support the call of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations, in its submission to this inquiry, for measures to ensure that all media organisations fulfil their obligation to be social responsible, fair, accurate, thorough, comprehensive and balanced in their reporting. We also affirm that where contentious opinions about religions are expressed, a right of reply must be provided for. As a minimum standard, both sides must be afforded the right to respond, in a peaceful and legal manner, so as to allow the public to arrive at their own conclusion.

6. Are there religious or moral implications in the development of new technologies such as the internet and or mobile phones, especially in regard to religious vilification and hatred?

There is no doubt that new technologies have provided powerful and far-reaching tools and networks for those who promote religious vilification and hatred. We note that the submission of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations to this inquiry that email has now replaced other media as the most common vehicle for anti-Semitic harassment in Australia. Our community has not been immune to the rise of hate Web sites and on-line attacks. We support APRO's call for greater vigilance in monitoring Australian hosted Web sites of religious, ethnic and politically extreme organisations.

## **8 Additional areas of concern or interest**

What additional issues do you think are relevant to and affect freedom of religion and belief in Australia?

As part of an increasingly integrated global society, Australia is directly influenced by the state of freedom of religion and belief in other parts of the world.

The Australian Government has recognized many people fleeing from religious persecution as refugees, and has accepted them into the Australian community. Australia should continue to accept such refugees, out of international obligation as well as humanitarian compassion.

Being a good international citizen requires Australia to uphold the rights of individuals in every country to freedom of religion and belief, and to continue to advocate on their behalf. The Australian Bahá'í Community has been grateful for the support that successive Australian Governments have given to the persecuted Bahá'ís of Iran through speaking out in international fora, co-sponsoring relevant resolutions passed by the United Nations, and other means.

In addition, we believe the Australian Government should work to strengthen the international mechanisms protecting the right of all to freedom of religion and belief. In particular, we recommend that the Government:

- Urge the United Nations to affirm unequivocally an individual's right to change his or her religion under international law.
- Support research and analysis that would clarify minimum standards for compliance with international law and develop indicators marking the presence or absence of freedom of religion or belief.
- Promote the publication by the United Nations of an annual world report assessing the state of this freedom throughout the world.
- Call on the United Nations to comprehensively and definitively address religious extremism as a major obstacle in the processes of peace.
- Advocate strengthening the role of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, increasing funding to allow for the closer monitoring of trends worldwide and at a country level, and expanding her mandate to include reports of States' efforts in implement her recommendations.