

Our Religious Freedom

Review our laws that protect religious freedom in New Zealand

New Zealand is at the crossroads. We face challenges to freedom of religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression.

Seven key aspects of religious freedom were developed by various mechanisms over the last five centuries, including the Treaty of Waitangi and the Bill of Rights Act 1999. But they are now at risk.

Freedom of religion is being significantly eroded in many countries of the world.

It is likely however, that a similar drift will follow here through expansive Human Rights Tribunal and Court interpretations. Recent examples of the way inroads have been made in the UK into these freedoms are as follows:

- **In 2017** a Crown Prosecution Service lawyer claimed that publicly quoting parts of the King James Bible in modern Britain should “be considered to be abusive and is a criminal matter”.
- **In 2016** a student who fled persecution in Africa was thrown off a university social work course because of a Facebook post affirming a Christian view of marriage.
- **In 2015** a prominent Northern Ireland pastor was prosecuted for a sermon in which he told his congregation that the Islamic doctrine that Jesus was a Muslim was “Satanic”.
- **In 2013** Nadia Eweida, an Egyptian Christian working for British Airways finally won a 6-year legal battle after being placed on unpaid leave for wearing a small cross on her necklace at work.

Freedom of religion and other historic freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and academic freedom are increasingly under threat in the UK and the same may very soon follow in NZ.

We need a formal government review of how well the seven fundamental aspects of freedom of religion are being protected in New Zealand today.

Over the centuries, these have become central to our national identity and values:

1. **Freedom of worship (achieved 1689)**
2. **Freedom to read the Bible in public (achieved 1547)**
3. **Freedom to interpret the Bible without government interference (achieved 1559)**
4. **Freedom to choose or change your faith or belief (achieved 1689)**
5. **Freedom to preach and try to convince others of the truth of your beliefs (achieved 1812)**
6. **Freedom to establish places of worship (achieved 1812)**
7. **Freedom from being required to affirm a particular worldview or set of beliefs in order to attend university, hold a public sector job or stand for election (achieved 1888)**

We need a review to see how well these freedoms are currently being implemented and whether any group, for example Christians, may be “falling through the cracks” and their rights being neglected, sidelined or undermined.

This is not a demand for special rights for Christians, but arises out of a concern that the space for religious freedom is shrinking as an increasingly muscular and intolerant secularism takes hold. It is very easy to feel safe and secure as a Christian in the West compared with our brothers and sisters elsewhere. But our religious freedom came about as a result of brave believers standing up to totalitarian authority. We believe it is time to enshrine those hard-won rights in New Zealand, for followers of all religions and none.

