



2012 Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom

**WHAT KIND OF
RELIGION IS FREE IN
THE PUBLIC SQUARE?**

**A WARNING FROM
THE UNITED STATES**

Ryan Messmore



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Introduction

The Reverend Peter Kurti,
Research Fellow, Religion and the Free Society Program

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of The Centre for Independent Studies, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the 14th Acton Lecture.

The Centre's Religion and the Free Society (RFS) program is a research program committed to investigating the implications of a liberal approach to religious freedom in civil society and to investigating the capacity of that society to maintain freedom *for* religion rather than freedom *from* religion in the public square.

Although a strictly secular organisation, a core feature of the Centre's work has been to examine the role of voluntary institutions in a free and open civil society, of which the churches and religions were more generally an important component and worthy of attention.

The RFS program does not discuss internal matters of discipline, dogma or organisation with which all faiths and churches wrestle from time to time. Instead, it offers a secular platform for scholarly reflections on issues affecting aspects of religion in the modern world and its interaction with free society—and to inform the public of the same.

The annual Acton Lecture remains one of the significant events in the CIS calendar. The lecture is named after the nineteenth century Christian thinker Lord Acton, and has been presented by prominent religious, political, social or economic thinkers committed to the principles of the market economy and civil society.

This year's Acton Lecture is being presented by Ryan Messmore, who recently moved from the United States with his wife, Karin, and their three children, to take up the position of President of Campion College, Australia's only Christian tertiary liberal arts college.

Before moving to Australia, Dr Messmore served as the William E. Simon Fellow in Religion and a Free Society at the Heritage Foundation in Washington D.C.

At the foundation, his research and scholarship focused on how religious commitments are brought to bear on political life to improve public discourse, foster civility, and strengthen civil society. He is a graduate of Duke University in North Carolina and Oxford University in the United Kingdom, where he completed his doctoral studies.

This evening, Dr Messmore is asking, ‘What kind of religion is free in the public square?’ Is it a strong, public expression of religious belief or a weakened, privatised expression?

The topic is timely and I’m pleased that we are addressing it tonight.
Welcome, Dr Ryan Messmore.

What Kind of Religion Is Free in the Public Square? A Warning from the United States

Ryan Messmore

We are faced with a troubling possibility that Western societies today may be safeguarding true freedom in the public square for only a certain kind of religion—a heavily privatised religion—and this narrowing of religious liberty could weaken the social order that serves and supports all citizens.

It is fitting to begin with a quote from Lord Acton, the nineteenth-century English Catholic historian and politician for whom this lecture is named. While Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, Lord Acton warned of a particular danger to liberty:

The modern theory ... is the enemy of that common freedom in which religious freedom is included. It condemns, as a State within the State, every inner group and community, class or corporation, administering its own affairs; and, by proclaiming the abolition of privileges, it emancipates the subjects of every such authority in order to transfer them exclusively to its own. It recognises liberty only in the individual, because it is only in the individual that liberty can be separated from authority ... Under its sway, therefore, every man may profess his own religion more or less freely; but his religion is not free to administer its own laws. In other words, religious profession is free, but Church government is controlled. And where ecclesiastical authority is restricted, religious liberty is virtually denied.

Lord Acton penned this warning in the 1860s, yet it foreshadowed several important trends that have taken hold in the West today: the severing of the notions of freedom and authority, freedom protected for the individual more so than for institutions, and the threat of expansive state power weakening the authority of other social institutions, including religious ones. According to Lord Acton, these trends lead to a situation in which a particular kind of religion enjoys a particular degree of freedom: the freedom for ‘every man to *profess* his own religion.’ What tends to be denied, however, is the more robust freedom for a group or community to ‘administer its own laws’; govern itself according to its core principles; or make daily, practical decisions in public based upon faith.

Sadly, the United States is moving ever closer to the scenario described by Lord Acton, and this move has been heightened by several policies and principles promoted by the Obama administration. What is increasingly being espoused in the United States is a view of religious liberty more in terms of a freedom of individuals to profess faith and attend church services than governing businesses and organisations according to church teachings. Religious liberty is being narrowed to an enfeebled ‘freedom of worship.’

This should be a warning to Australia, for, as common participants in the larger Western tradition, the two countries have inherited similar understandings of religion (and freedom). And these understandings, I submit, are partly responsible for the weakening of religious liberty today.

Simply put, how a society understands religion shapes its view of religious freedom in terms of nature and scope. In other words, *who* religious freedom protects is influenced by whom we consider to be ‘religious,’ and that depends on what we think religion is.

I therefore want to examine the trend in modern Western cultures towards the privatisation of religion—a trend that has emerged hand-in-hand with the growth of the modern state. And I want to explore how these forces have helped weaken religious liberty and undermine the public authority of religious organisations.

Privatisation of religion

The British missionary Lesslie Newbigin, an astute student of modern Western culture, claims the ‘decisive feature of our culture’ is the ‘division of human life into public and private’ along with the ‘separation of fact and value.’ That is, people in the West today tend to divide the world into two broad categories: a public domain and a private domain.

The public side is the arena of facts and pure, unencumbered reason. This is where the hard sciences reside—the arena of economics, politics and the natural sciences. This is where supposedly objective knowledge is achieved through the disinterested study of cause-and-effect. And this is where the supposedly neutral state operates with authority.

The private side is held to be the side not of facts and reason but of emotions, opinions and personal preferences. This is the ‘soft’ realm of art, music and literature; it is where religion resides (for religion is assumed to deal not with logic but with values and faith). This is the subjective arena where personal notions about goodness, beauty and purpose are pursued. And this is where churches and families exercise their role (within the privacy of their homes and worship spaces—often called ‘sanctuaries’).

This dualism—between faith and reason, fact and value, religion and politics, science and the humanities—is the world in which the average Western citizen lives. This is the air she breathes. It is this split that helps explain why she turns on the news and hears political parties labelled in terms of ‘social justice’ versus ‘family values,’ or why her child at school can be marked wrong on a science exam but not on an ethics exam. (Many secondary schools in the United States can only evaluate students in such classes on how well they articulate their feelings or beliefs.) And it is this split that helps explain why many who use religious language in public debates are accused of doing something inappropriate—of smuggling foreign goods across a secure border.

This privatisation of religion is partly due to the forces of state power pushing religious bodies out of the public square. But this phenomenon is also partly a result of changes in the understanding

of religion itself, what some have called ‘an extraordinary redefinition of fundamental religious belief ... in the West.’ Whereas religion once had to do with the bonds and duties that tied people to God and to others in their community, today it is often used to refer to a set of interior beliefs about the individual soul and the afterlife. Stephen Carter, a law professor at Yale University, asserts that at the root of this process lies the widely held intuition that ‘religion is like building model airplanes, just another hobby: something quiet, something private, something trivial.’

As religion has become increasingly privatised, it has also become contracted in its focus. What the term ‘religiosity’ refers to seems to have narrowed. Scholars have described this tapered focus in terms of *therapeutic spirituality*, where emphasis lies with psychological health and self-actualisation. According to theologian David Wells, what God is principally thought to offer believers in this new spirituality is relief from negative feelings such as anxiety and guilt.

The key point is that, in many cultures today, people tend to understand religion primarily in terms of an individual’s insides and insights; they relegate religion to a private corner of life and associate it with only a certain sub-set of concerns, vocations and activities (such as prayer, meditation, the afterlife, preaching, psychological counselling, etc.).

(Note: By ‘privatisation’ I do not refer to the degree to which people might be uncomfortable ‘wearing their religion on their sleeve.’ That’s a different question. A person can decline to keep a Bible on his desk or talk loudly about faith at work, yet still desire to run his business upon basic Christian principles.)

The privatisation of religion shapes views about religious freedom—what religious freedom protects and who should enjoy that protection. According to this view, religious freedom safeguards the ability for individuals to do things like pray, sing and listen to religious teachings. That is, it applies to activities that take place during special times and in special religious places—to what a Christian might do on Sunday in a sanctuary or what a Jew might do on Saturday in a synagogue. But what about Monday afternoon in the workplace, school or hospital? Are people genuinely free to carry out their day-to-day activities and decisions in these arenas of public life?

Unfortunately, in the United States they are becoming less so. A recent Pew Research Center study ranked 197 countries in terms of the restrictions they place on religion. In the year ending in mid-2010, the United States moved from low to moderate levels of restrictions, and was one of the 16 countries to experience increased levels of government restrictions as well as social hostilities towards religion.

Furthermore, legal trends in the United States threaten the ability of institutions like hospitals, schools and small businesses to operate in line with the teachings of their church. Within a privatised view of religion, these institutions and their employees aren't readily acknowledged as being 'religious' and thus worthy of legal protection.

In short, we are seeing play out in the United States today the situation that Lord Acton warned of more than a century ago: a society in which 'every man may profess his own religion more or less freely, but his religion is not free to administer its own laws.' Religious liberty is being weakened to a mere freedom of worship.

A policy example: The HHS mandate

How is this playing out in the United States today?

Consider the mandate dictated by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*, also known as 'Obamacare.' This mandate requires that all employers in the United States who offer group health insurance to their employees must cover abortion-inducing drugs, contraception and sterilisation. This includes the 'morning-after' and 'week-after' pills, and applies to employers regardless of whether they receive government funding.

Many have argued that this mandate violates the religious liberty recognised by the US Constitution. The mandate forces many religious organisations to violate their conscience and the teachings of their church or be penalised. The critics of the mandate note that there is no way out for religious employers; either they comply and violate their religious convictions or they stop providing health plans altogether, whereby they face a different fine.

According to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, more than 100 organisations and businesses, including more than 30 universities,

have joined 33 separate lawsuits against the HHS mandate. The plaintiffs are both Protestant and Catholic, and include Wheaton and Biola universities as well as Notre Dame and Belmont Abby, Hobby Lobby as well as the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN).

The penalty for failing to comply with the mandate is \$2,000 per employee per year. So given that Catholic Charities employs 70,000 people nationwide, it would face a fine of \$140 million each year. Hobby Lobby, a retail chain of arts and crafts stores, could face fines of up to \$1.3 million *per day*.

The HHS mandate hinders employers from remaining faithful to their church in the way they run their business. This is like the government telling kosher delis they must serve bacon or pay a penalty!

In addition to these arguments about violating the constitutional freedom of religion, the HHS mandate reveals troubling notions about the way the Obama administration understands religion and religious freedom. This is most apparent in the mandate's religious exemption.

To be exempt, an institution must meet criteria such as:

- acquire classification as a tax-exempt, non-profit charity
- have as its primary purpose the inculcation of religious values
- primarily employ only those who share its faith
- primarily serve only those who share its faith.

Some have called this the narrowest religious exemption in US federal law. I want to draw special attention to how this exemption assumes certain views of religion and the church.

A. Privatised view of religion

This exemption reveals a heavily privatised notion of religion. For the sake of qualifying for the exemption, only certain kinds of institutions are considered 'religious.' Churches, synagogues, mosques and monasteries make the cut, but religious hospitals, schools, orphanages and other charitable organisations do not—even though the Bible declares 'pure and undefiled religion' to include caring for orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27).

It seems the federal government is willing to safeguard religious freedom for groups that *preach* Christian charity but not for groups that *operate* Christian charities. And why not? Because those charitable organisations tend to serve people in need without first stopping to ask their denominational affiliation.

Under Obamacare, not even Jesus and his disciples would be considered religious enough to qualify as ‘religious.’ Nor would the Good Samaritan or Mother Teresa, for they did more than teach religious beliefs—they ministered to whoever was hurting in front of them, even if those in need didn’t belong to their church.

This exemption reveals a view of religion as something having to do merely with doctrines and beliefs, something only to be preached about and celebrated in seminaries and worship services. It therefore ignores the religious identity of many other kinds of activities, vocations and institutions—in short, the social realities of religious faith. (The exemption also fails to protect people of faith who run organisations that aren’t explicitly religious as well as the many organisations that self-insure.)

B. Functionalised view of the church

In addition to revealing a privatised notion of religion, the HHS mandate also reveals a particular understanding of the church vis-à-vis the public square. Simply put, the Obama administration seems to view churches and faith-based organisations as tools of the state that enjoy religious liberty protection only if they conform to the state’s image.

This gets to the heart of Lord Acton’s concern about liberty. Remember Acton’s line quoted above:

The modern theory ... condemns, as a State within the State, every inner group and community ... administering its own affairs; and ... [the state] emancipates the subjects of every such authority in order to transfer them exclusively to its own.

As the modern state has expanded in size and power, it has recognised as a threat the existence of smaller communities of authority

within its borders. Lord Acton says that the state views such groups or communities as ‘states within the state’ and thus as competitors to the state’s authority. The state has therefore sought to limit the freedom—or ‘abolish the privileges’—of such groups in order to transfer people from the groups’ authority to the state’s authority.

Far from the neutral state passively ignoring claims about what people should desire and worship, Lord Acton reminds us that the state aggressively competes with other social institutions for citizens’ affections and allegiance. It was this competition that prompted American sociologist Robert Nisbet to claim: ‘The real conflict in modern political history has not been, as is so often stated, between State and individual, but between State and social group.’

Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, the state has grown to absorb many of the functions and responsibilities once exercised by institutions like family, church, and local neighbourhood association, causing them to decline in public significance. Subsequently, their members have steadily transferred to civic government the expectations they once placed in these smaller institutions.

The resulting view of society risks seeing all other social institutions as subordinate to the omni-competent state. This leads to a ‘functionalised’ approach to social institutions, whereby they are held to gain their legitimacy by serving a particular function on behalf of the government. The post office delivers the mail, public schools educate children, and the national institutes of health conduct medical research—all on behalf of the government. In a similar fashion, we risk coming to view religious ministries and organisations as existing solely to serve the state in a particular way, perhaps by making people more nice or moral or helping to tackle social problems like hunger or homelessness. Not surprisingly, within this context, the paternal state claims the authority to define and regulate how ministries exercise this function.

This is the kind of approach that the Obama administration seems to have adopted with the HHS mandate. Faith-based institutions can serve people in public only if they act as agents of government, following the norms and values of bureaucrats in Washington, D.C.

When it comes to solving social challenges, Obamacare moves the dial of moral decision making drastically toward the state and

attempts to remake civil society in the government's own image. This isn't the neutral state administering blind justice through the use of disinterested reason; as Lord Acton recognised, this is one particular institution competing with other social institutions for authority. This is a state bearing a certain vision of the good claiming to unify its people, meet their basic needs, and rescue them from their problems. One could argue that this is the state setting itself up as a church.

In short, by subtly promoting certain views of religion and the Church, the HHS mandate and its corresponding religious exemption threaten the proper authority and integrity of social institutions and trample religious liberty in a significant way.

We need a more robust understanding of religion and religious freedom.

A more robust view of religion and religious freedom

A more robust view would challenge the notion of a purely privatised religion. According to Dr Paul Marshall at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, many believe:

Religion is not a separate, isolated segment of human existence. It is not merely what people do with their solitude. It is not only acts of worship on a Sunday, or a Sabbath, or a Friday. It is not simply adherence to creeds or doctrines. Religion is one of the fundamental shapers of human life.

Rather than a private hobby for home or the weekends, the major religious traditions in America and Australia teach that faith should be integrated into every sphere of activity, including work. This view holds that faithfulness entails more than just displaying religious symbols on one's desk or praying with colleagues during lunch. Faithfulness also concerns the actual work people do and the decisions they make regarding how to run their businesses, including what health insurance packages to offer their employees.

Furthermore, the Judeo-Christian tradition affirms that the call to serve God through one's work extends beyond occupations like teaching doctrines or leading worship services. For many years,

religious adherents in the West have held that all sorts of work can—and should—be done to the glory of God. This includes economics, politics and the other sciences typically perceived to operate within the public realm.

This more holistic view of religion lends itself to a more robust understanding of religious liberty, one that protects the ability of individuals to live out faith in all aspects of life.

A more robust approach to religious liberty is also aware of and resists the state's attempt to absorb the proper authority and functions of other institutions. Such an approach recognises the importance of good government but does not concede to the state a monopoly of authority and presence in public. Likewise, this robust view presupposes a social order in which religious communities do not assume the status of mere agents of the state. Churches and religious organisations (within my own Christian tradition, in particular) are not equivalent to the post office or the national parks and wildlife service, fulfilling some narrow function for the state.

Recovering this robust view means recovering an understanding of the church as a community of authority in its own right, with its own internal purposes and legitimacy. There is a rich tradition here upon which Christians can call. For example, St Paul referred to the members of the church in Ephesus not just as *believers* of ideas but as *fellow citizens* of a social body (Ephesians 2:19). And St Peter, in his first epistle, described the church as 'a chosen people ... a holy nation.' Furthermore, the early church could have avoided much persecution if it had accepted the protected status in Roman society as a private cult (members of private cults were free to believe and worship their various gods in private, as long as they worshipped Caesar in the arena of Roman politics), but the early church was willing to suffer death before adopting this sort of private religious status.

Since then, Christian congregations and parishes have often been at the forefront of efforts to care for the sick, educate the illiterate, resist tyranny, shelter the homeless, abolish slavery, reform prisons, feed the hungry, train the unemployed, and address many other social—and political—problems. But members of churches have not primarily engaged these issues by lobbying rulers or advocating

for government policies (although such actions may, at time, be important). Rather, they have accomplished these initiatives primarily by serving as communities of authority in their own right.

This is why Pope Benedict XVI claims that ‘The Church’s witness, then, is of its nature public,’ and why Newbigin argues that religion does not belong in its own special section of the Sunday paper; it is perhaps better included in the pages dedicated to ‘public events.’ Far from the ‘privately engaging but publicly irrelevant’ phenomena that the Christian religion is often portrayed to be, it takes a public, communal form and can contribute in significant ways to the common good of the larger society.

The benefit of religious liberty to the state

Even if a government fails to hold a robust view of religion, it can still benefit that government to protect, within limits, the ability of institutions to ‘administer their own laws.’ Governments can require such institutions to do so in a way that upholds public peace and order and respects the rule of law. But within these broad boundaries, such freedom can be good not only for those institutions but also for the larger society and government.

Religious bodies can minister to people of various needs as well as model social solutions for other communities and societies. Churches have the capacity to shape individuals to enter, lead and serve in different stations in society, including politics. But the underlying point is that to receive the benefits of this utilitarian relationship, governments need to protect what makes these institutions effective in the first place.

What makes them effective often has to do with their distinct identity and worldview, which is embodied in certain activities and practices. Such institutions, not to mention their practices, are not generated or created by government. Rather, they tend to come from the inner logic and convictions of the communities’ faith.

A government cannot penalise or restrict the particular practices or decisions of a religious group and then expect it to operate with the same motivation and potency. To borrow an image from C. S. Lewis,

the state cannot castrate institutions of their faith-based elements and then expect the geldings to be fruitful for the state.

Campion College and other faith-based universities

Given the vocation that has brought me to Australia, serving as president of Campion College, I have a particular interest in the ability of faith-based universities to operate according to their religious convictions.

Campion College is a Catholic tertiary institution in Sydney that offers Australia's only undergraduate degree in the liberal arts. Campion's mission statement reads: 'To form future leaders of society and the Church by a broad program of learning in the Liberal Arts that *integrates the insights of faith and reason.*'

Thus, at the core of its mission Campion stands against the dualism that characterises modern society. Campion College doesn't teach that the world is divided into separate and unrelated compartments or disciplines. Instead, it challenges this dualism and fragmentation by teaching a unified approach to knowledge. Campion recognises that religion doesn't proffer in mere opinions but engages reason to make truth claims. Thus, the college does not hermetically seal off science from the humanities, fact from value, or reason from faith. It holds these together, and in doing so, offers a genuine educational alternative in Australia. Campion is pioneering in this country a time-tested model that will hopefully contribute to the larger public conversation about education.

But to make their distinct contribution, learning communities like Campion must be able to sustain distinct habits and practices. At Campion, these include celebrating the Eucharist daily, wearing academic gowns during weekly formal dinners, caring for students as entire persons, fostering discernment of their future career paths, displaying artwork and imagery that honours our history and tradition, and upholding core principles that govern the hiring of employees as well as behaviour in the residence halls.

These are not incidental trivialities or peculiar ornamentation added to the real stuff of education. Rather, they are essential in

accomplishing Campion's mission of transforming students who can transform the world.

In short, Campion College—along with other colleges and universities in a civil society—need more than just a watered-down freedom of worship; they require the kind of freedom Lord Acton advocated: freedom to 'govern themselves according to their own several principles.'

Conclusion

The problem today is not simply one of a handful of secular voices who want to cleanse the public square of religion per se (or of some religions rather than others). Rather, perhaps a more pernicious problem is a set of modern assumptions that is making the public square conducive to only a certain kind of religion—a heavily privatised kind.

Australian policymakers and citizens need to be aware of how certain notions of religion can be embedded in public policies. As I've tried to show, even policies that sound favourable or desirable to religious groups—policies like 'religious exemptions'—can undermine the authority and public role of those very groups.

Echoing the concern that Lord Acton expressed more than a century ago, Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh declared: 'If religious freedom is merely the freedom to "go to church" where you want, the Church is not free to be who she is.'

Societies, even highly secularised ones, need to safeguard space for robust forms of religion and religious communities in their midst. Such freedom not only protects the integrity of churches and other institutions, but it also frees them to serve the common good in their distinct way.

Closing Remarks

The Right Reverend Robert Forsyth,
Bishop of South Sydney, Anglican Diocese of Sydney

Ladies and gentleman, I have a great pleasure but a very difficult task. A great pleasure to move the vote of thanks for Dr Ryan Messmore for your timely, insightful and helpful lecture. The challenge is to try to bring briefly what it is about the lecture that has been so helpful. I must say, despite your gratuitous cultural insults at the beginning of the lecture, we show your own trust in the robust freedom of Australians and we accept that.

The issues you raise are real and significant here in Australia, and I believe will never be resolved. There are deep tensions in the very nature of religious institutions and liberal society. By their very nature, these matters will remain always and these elements will always be contested. There is only one place in Australia where the church and state lines are entirely clear. It's in the Sydney Town Hall arcade, near where I work. The Anglican Church, of which I am a bishop, owns one side and Town Hall the other. There is a very helpful metal line down the middle. If you ever want to see the church-state line clearly, there it is. But only there, I'm afraid.

Dr Messmore, I really appreciate your drawing attention to Lesslie Newbigin's fact-value distinction. But you also suggested that Newbigin in fact has overplayed it because the great challenge is when our culture regards certain values as facts. In Australia, it is non-discrimination and equality that trump any other value, leading to major issues for churches and other bodies. And we have been faced with the awful situation of being exceptions. 'Why should the church be allowed to discriminate,' said a recent news article. We don't want to be allowed to discriminate. We want to have a place in civil society's general plays, and that's the challenge you drew our attention to.

Our culture has a deep fear of conflict. Perhaps the distinction between privatised religion versus public religion was a way to deal with some of the terrible conflicts that occurred in Europe in the appalling 30 Years War and so forth. We are still anxious about religious conflict, certainly in Australia where sectarianism was a reality 60 years ago. It's a solution that is a non-solution but it's still a solution. With Islam, in Australia anyway, people talk about the 'Islamic faith.' That is reading Islam through totally Christian eyes. That's not a true way to think about Islam at all— Islam is not a faith, it's a practice. Hence, I'm going to follow with great interest the challenge now, not of the Roman Catholic Irish who were once thought to be disloyal Australians by us Tory Anglicans (of course, we've since made friends with each other and the sectarianism is gone) but of this massive new challenge. Nor should we protect Islam or any religion. I am very anxious about laws protecting religions against being criticised. It would be terrible for all of us if that happens.

One last word—religious practitioners need to make sure we're playing a fair game. My church has a DNA of 'Establishment.' We once ruled the law in England about what you could and couldn't say and believe, as the Catholic Church has done in Europe in various places. We both are liberated from this but we need to make sure we're playing the game fairly. We don't just want freedom for ourselves, we want freedom for the society—and that's a freedom we in Australia believe in.

Dr Messmore, you are very welcome in this country. I'm looking forward to hearing more and more of your contribution both in your professional life at Campion and your continued vigorous engagement in the public square, as you have tonight. I cannot think of a more worthy Acton lecturer so thank you very much for your contribution.



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The Centre meets the need for informed debate on issues of importance to a free and democratic society in which individuals and business flourish, unhindered by government intervention. In encouraging competition in ideas, The Centre for Independent Studies carries out an activities programme which includes:

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What Kind of Religion Is Free in the Public Square? A Warning from the United States

Recent events in the United States suggest a weakening of robust religious freedom, with religious organisations and institutions facing critical challenges to their freedom in the public square.

The problem is not simply one of a handful of secular voices who want to cleanse the public square of religion per se (or of some religions rather than others). Rather, perhaps a more pernicious problem is a set of modern assumptions that is making the public square conducive to only a certain kind of religion—a heavily privatised kind.

Australian policymakers and citizens need to be aware of how certain notions of religion can be embedded in public policies. Even policies that sound favourable or desirable to religious groups—policies like ‘religious exemptions’—can undermine the authority and public role of those very groups.

Societies, even highly secularised ones, need to safeguard space for robust forms of religion and religious communities in their midst. Such freedom not only protects the integrity of churches and other institutions, but it also frees them to serve the common good in their distinct way.

In the 14th Annual Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom, Ryan Messmore asks what kind of religion is free in the public square and whether we have a strong, public expression of religious belief or a weakened, privatised expression.



Dr Ryan Messmore is President of Campion College, Australia’s only Christian tertiary liberal arts college. He recently moved to Australia from the United States, where he was William E. Simon Fellow in Religion and a Free Society at the Heritage Foundation in Washington D.C.

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