1. Introduction

1.1 In Australia approximately 30% of all school children attend non-government schools, and all but a very small number of those schools are associated with religious organizations. Approximately two-thirds of non-government school students attend Catholic schools, and most of the remaining schools are Christian-based, with a small number of Jewish schools, Muslim schools and schools based on other faiths.

1.2 The 1998 “Adelaide Declaration” on the National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century states that “Schooling provides a foundation for young Australians’ intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development.” Religious schools are well-suited to providing the kind of educational environment and experience that fulfils these expectations of schooling. The Declaration also states that “Governments set the public policies that foster the pursuit of excellence, enable a diverse range of educational choices and aspirations, safeguard the entitlement of all young people to high quality schooling, promote the economic use of public resources, and uphold the contribution of schooling to a socially cohesive and culturally rich society.” Publicly supported religious schools contribute to all these public policy goals.

1.3 In respect of the historic contribution of Catholic schools in particular to Australian society, they have always had both a religious and a social dimension to their mission. They enabled many people to take their place in society, helping them to make the often difficult journey from poverty to modest prosperity. In the post-war years, when migrants came in large numbers, Catholic schools enabled their sons and daughters to integrated successfully and rapidly into Australian society. Dr Ken Boston, Director-General of the NSW Department of Education, said in 1997 this: “Through successive waves of immigration dating back to the last century, Australia’s public schools,
together with Catholic parish schools, have been without doubt the most important factor in shaping the pluralist, democratic multicultural nation which Australia is today.”

2. Religious Schooling under attack

2.1 In the wake of September 11, the historic consensus in favour of publicly supported religious schools has come under attack. The old argument that religion and democracy cannot go together has been given a new lease of life. Michael Lind, a fellow of the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think-tank, argued late last year that it is not Christianity and Islam that are at war in the struggle against terrorism, but “humanist civilisation” and religious civilisation. The Judeo-Christian tradition has contributed nothing to the development of a free “tolerant, individualist, commercial society” in the West, Lind claims. Christianity “has always had far less in common with humanist civilisation than with orthodox Islam”.

2.2 Religion, in this view, is the enemy of tolerance and social harmony. Each religion promotes as true its own teachings about the nature of God, the universe and human morality, and since such teachings are not easily tested against commonly agreed criteria, differences cannot be resolved rationally, and this leads inevitably to conflict.

2.3 Thus, on this view, religion should be not be promoted by the state in any form, particularly not through the provision of financial support to religious schools. This would be tantamount to the promotion of sectarianism, social division, elitism and religious “ghettoes”. So the argument goes. In Britain, even before the Twin Towers were destroyed, Anthony Grayling attacked the Blair Government’s proposal to expand access to faith-based schools as likely to “dramatically increase the potential for social divisions, tension and conflict.”

2.4 The National Catholic Education Commission submits that not only is this view flawed in theory, but certainly does not reflect the Australian experience, where religious schools, and Catholic schools in particular, have contributed to a vibrant and vigorous multi-cultural and multi-faith democracy.

3. Religious Teaching on Tolerance and Religious Freedom as a Fundamental Human Right

3.1 Contrary to the view that religion is intolerant of difference, most religions have as an article of faith, as a central doctrine, some variation of “The Golden Rule”, the teaching one should not act towards another in a way that one would not wish oneself to be acted upon. That of course includes not coercing others to adopt a religion against their conscience and genuinely held beliefs. The Catholic Church, in its Vatican II Declaration on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis Humanae, states that

The human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that everyone are to be immune from coercion by individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, no men or women are forced to act against their convictions nor are any
persons to be restrained from acting in accordance with their convictions in religious matters, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. (n.2)

3.2 The question arises as to what are “due limits”? Is a government justified in suppressing religious differences because it believes (mistakenly) that this will lead to greater tolerance and social harmony? No. “Due limits” refers to the fact that religious freedom, like all freedom, is exercised in human society and therefore is governed by the moral principle of personal and social responsibility:

In availing of any freedom people must respect the moral principle of personal and social responsibility: in exercising their rights individuals and social groups are bound by the moral law to have regard for the rights of others and common good of all. Everybody must be treated with justice and humanity. Furthermore, since civil society has the right to protect itself against possible abuses committed on the name of religious freedom, the responsibility of providing such protection rests especially with the civil authority. *(Dignitatis Humanae n.7).*

3.3 In other words, the “due limits” which the state is entitled to impose on the exercise of freedom of religion are those limitations such as are necessary to ensure that the religious freedom of all is respected, and that one group or individual does not, in the name of its own religious freedom, deny legitimate liberty to other individuals or groups. So the common good is served not by suppressing religious freedom, but by encouraging its responsible expression.

3.4 Furthermore, religious freedom is a fundamental human right. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes 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.” Religious freedom is grounded in the dignity of the person, whereby we are endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility for seeking truth, especially religious truth, and living by that truth. This truth-seeking is to be conducted in accordance with our social nature, that is, with the aid of education, communication and dialogue.

4. **Religion and Culture – related, but not the same**

4.1 In a free and tolerant society, if a person changes their religion, it is usually for one of two purposes. Either they do it because they honestly come to believe that the truth lies in the new belief system. Or they do it for what might be called “family reasons”, in order to fit in socially with their spouse’s religion. In this former case, religious truth is seen as a crucial matter. In the latter case, the issue of religious truth is marginal – the person regards one set of religious beliefs as equally true or untrue as another, and the difference between them is essentially cultural.

4.2 This conjunction of religion and cultural identity is common, and inaccurate. The history of Australia’s development as a harmonious and tolerant society is often
portrayed as a history of accepting and integrating into an increasingly diverse mainstream various “waves” of immigrants who were characterised by an identity that conjoined ethnicity or culture with religion. So we have the convicts who were predominantly “Irish Catholics”, followed by the “Chinese Buddhists”, then, in various parts of the country, the “German Lutherans”, the “Italian Catholics” and the “Greek Orthodox”. Finally since the 1970s, we have had the Catholic Vietnamese and middle-eastern Muslims. In other words, there is a widespread perception that sees religion and ethno-cultural identity as conjoined. Tolerance of racial and cultural diversity is seen to have its corollary in tolerance of religious diversity.

4.3 But this perception leads to problems. It means that differences in cultural identity are often linked to religion, and so attempting to persuade someone that their religion is wrong can be interpreted as an attack on their ethnic or cultural identity. Attacking a person’s cultural/ethnic/racial identity is genuinely disrespectful of the person and harmful to social harmony and so it understandable that people should want to minimise the occurrence of such attacks.

4.4 However, this should not flow over into discouragement of debate and discussion about religious truth, because though they are related, religious belief and cultural/ethnic identity are not the same. Failure to make this distinction has led people to argue that social harmony can only come about either, (a) if everyone believes the same religion, or (b) religious belief, and debate about it, is minimised. Either way the state could claim a mandate, in the interests of social harmony, to curtail free speech and freedom of religion. In medieval times, the first option was chosen – make everyone believe the same thing. Today, however, the second option is seen as a legitimate tool for creating social harmony. In China straight out repression of religion is enforced by the state. In Western liberal democracies the approach can manifest itself in a number of ways, from introducing laws that make it an offence to proselytise in public (on the grounds that others might be offended) to reducing public support for faith-based enterprises, such as schools.

5. Taking Religion Seriously

5.1 If religion is taken seriously on its own terms as the quest for fundamental truths, rather than seen as simply one expression of culture and ethnicity, society would be actively promoting it rather than seeking ways to minimise religious discussion and debate. And far from causing social division, the encouragement of religion and the promotion of public discussion of religion, based on ideas rather than identity, would foster greater understanding of common humanity and greater recognition of shared aspirations for meaning and wisdom. Furthermore, the promotion of religion would have beneficial outcomes for society as a whole as people come to recognise and live according to the moral requirements of their faith. As stated in Dignitatis Humanae, the protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of the human person is an essential duty of every civil authority. The civil authority must therefore undertake effectively to safeguard the religious freedom of all the citizens by just legislation and other appropriate means. It must help to create conditions favourable to the fostering of religious life so that citizens will really be in a position to exercise their religious
rights and fulfil their religious duties and so that society itself may enjoy the benefits of justice and peace, which result from people’s faithfulness to God and to His holy will. (n.6).

5.2 If one analyses the current causes of social disharmony and breakdown, a far more persuasive case could be made for the proposition that the decline of religion, rather than its promotion, has been the cause of many problems. For example, religious faith is a demonstrated inhibiting factor in youth suicide and drug addiction. Furthermore, the major fault-lines in Australian society are between rich and poor, urban and rural, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and particular ethnic minorities, not between different religions. Greater appreciation of the social benefits of religion is likely to minimise these problems rather than exacerbate them. But appreciation of religion requires its promotion, not just tolerance.

6. The Australian Debate

6.1 The healthy and vibrant non-government school sector in Australia, with its active promotion of religion and religious values – including the religious teachings about treating others of different faiths with respect and about the need to promote a just society – makes a vital contribution to the common good. All schools – including government schools – have a private dimension. Parents want the best for their children. This includes the desire for their children to be educated into a system of values, often underpinned by religious beliefs. Policies that support affordable access for parental choice of religious schooling find themselves supported by a variety of international conventions. Article 26(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

6.2 But all schools, including non-government schools, also have a public dimension in that contribute to the knowledge base of our community. And religious schools make a particular contribution, as they actively promote diversity and respect (not just tolerance) of others and working for social justice as a religious imperative.

6.3 As mentioned above, the claim is often heard these days that religious schools do not warrant public support because they promote private “sectarian” values, rather than public ones. For example, the argument is sometimes made that the purpose of religious schools is to shut out people with different ideas, beliefs and social backgrounds. In other words, religious schools, rather than bringing public benefits, detract from the common good.

6.4 A common erroneous assumption underpinning such arguments is that the religious purpose of religious schools can be clearly separated and distinguished from other essentially ‘secular’ goals. For example, the National Goals for Schooling include a goal that students should “have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice…”. It is sometimes argued by opponents of government funding for religious schools that while both public schools and religious schools can both subscribe to these goals, what distinguishes public schools from religious schools is that secular education goals are the primary mission
of the former, while the primary mission of religious schools is essentially religious formation.

6.5 This betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the religious world-view. For Catholic educators, the social justice goal that secularists describe as “secular” is integral to religious formation, not separate from it. The Catholic school’s support for these goals is inspired and informed by the Catholic understanding of the social dimension of religious faith. For a Catholic educator to say, ‘Our school promotes religion first and social justice second’, as if a Catholic school could do one without the other, makes absolutely no sense at all. One may as well say that one is interested in the pursuit of truth, but not of knowledge. It would be as sensible as a waitress declaring that her primary mission was to serve the customers, and taking their orders was less important.

6.6 The National Catholic Education Commission has produced a statement on accountability, which states:

> While Catholic schools receive public funds, they are not public agencies. Fidelity to the church’s mission is the primary concern of Catholic schools, which ought not to be compromised. In order to comply with what the Catholic community regards as essential to the character and mission of Catholic education, the latter must prevail and no penalties, financial or otherwise, should result.

The distinction that is being drawn in this document is not a distinction between the purposes of public schools as opposed to the purposes of Catholic schools, Rather it is the distinction between a body over which the state has complete control and one which is also accountable to an additional authority. While Catholic schools are subsidised by the state, they are not organs of the state. They have a higher accountability, to both the Catholic community and to society generally. Catholic schools are ‘public’ insofar as they aim to serve the common good of all society.

6.7 It is also sometimes asserted that parents who send their children to public schools are public-spirited, with an implication that parents who send their children to non-government schools have little interest in the common good. The corollary is that only students who emerge from public schools are public-spirited, while the students who emerge from non-government schools are not. There is ample evidence to suggest that this is not the case.

6.8 The problem with such arguments is not the defence of public education they mount, because public education should be supported, but the fact that they are inclined to denigrate, unfairly and inaccurately, the contribution that religious schools make to a diverse, vibrant and inclusive Australian society.

6.9 The contribution of religion and religious schools to a culturally diverse and social harmonious Australian society should be recognised, celebrated and promoted.