

THE AUSTRALIAN

Religious worship takes back pew

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12:00AM MAY 30, 2020 • 16 COMMENTS

From Monday, NSW will open its pubs and cafes to allow 50 people at one time. As well as hairdressers and beauty salons — without which, we are told, some women cannot live — gyms and tattooists will be open and there will be a specific exemption for lawn bowls. However, in the initial freeing up of restrictions, a very large group was ignored: regular churchgoers.

On Friday the government of NSW finally allowed the opening of churches, synagogues and mosques beyond the stage one limit of 10, but that was only after protests from church representatives, with a petition that attracted 20,000 signatures in one day, and stories highlighting what looked like blatant discrimination.

The question is, why did the Berejiklian government take so long to do this? Everything state and federal governments have done so far has been aimed at reducing transmission of the virus by using social distancing. They have succeeded. Yet the expansion of numbers in pubs, restaurants and beauty salons has far more potential for transmission from person to person or via surfaces than would be the case in churches, where social distancing is easy to put into practice, as it has already with very small numbers. I know, having been to mass for 10. Expanding to 50 is not a problem.

Why were people with religious faith again put at the end of the line? This is not part of a staged reopening of churches. It looked suspiciously like curtailment of the right to worship. There is a lot of simmering anger over the NSW government's failure to include places of worship in the initial opening of public places, especially among Catholics. It has been compounded by a lack of transparency governing these rules, for which there is no explanation. This hasn't gone unchallenged by the hierarchy.

The broader question, especially within Catholic circles, is if Gladys Berejiklian thought she could treat religious worship differently during this crisis, how far is the state government prepared to go in imposing its own agenda on religious practice. Will it follow other states and the ACT to impose laws governing practices such as the confessional? Will it try to curtail the right of religious bodies to hire and fire personnel? After the Premier's grudging response to the churches in this crisis, these are valid questions for the future relationship of the church and state in NSW

Make no mistake, Berejiklian's response was grudging and came only after pressure was applied by Catholic Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher. He wrote to her on May 1 asking why churches were not being treated in the same way as other public places. The Premier replied only this week, and her reply was almost dismissive and did not give him a definite answer. Fisher pointed out that the church did not want special treatment, it just wanted equal treatment. He also emphasised that all the appropriate distancing measures, including modifying some elements of Catholic ritual, such as the sign of peace and communion only in the hand, were already being practised.

This seemingly reasonable argument had no initial effect. Berejiklian's government has given priority only to what it deems essential economic services; apparently the spiritual needs of the population were not essential.

This is in line with the ongoing theme against pandemic closures from most prominent commentators which overwhelmingly has been on economic repercussions. They are real, as I know from my own family, three of whom have lost jobs. But just as real and important are the psychological and spiritual repercussions.

Unfair limitations on numbers able to attend communal religious worship amounts to curtailing the ability of people to calibrate their own psychological and spiritual welfare, which is of far more use to them and to the community than government-sponsored hotlines.

It is about time government recognised that religion plays a vital part in people's ability to understand the world around them and that communal worship gives many people the necessary support they need to carry on.

This is particularly the case for older people, and it is a cruel irony that one excuse for not expanding numbers in places of worship is that the churchgoing public is an older demographic. So older people are likelier to pick up COVID-19 infection at a pub or cafe, but being deprived of their religious support is secondary?

This support is partly communal; to be with other people of a similar outlook, to hear and understand the same prayers and participate in the same rituals. For Catholics, young or old, participation in the sacramental ritual of the mass and the physical reception of holy communion has a deep spiritual significance beyond the communal.

The outcry against the NSW government treatment of religion should be a warning to future governments that think they can put religion under pressure. The religious demographic in Australia is not small and Catholics are the largest religious denomination. Although weekly Catholic mass attendance has plummeted in this generation, it is still about 623,000 people or 11.8 per cent of the total Catholic population. Add the numbers who are occasional attendees, and regular Protestant and Pentecostal churchgoers, as well as Jews and Muslims, and the religious demographic is a potentially powerful lobby.

Freedom of religion, including fundamental beliefs and practice, has come under attack by niche groups and government. Religious leaders and the population who care about that freedom are willing to support it because now more than ever our spiritual needs need to be addressed. Many people have used this time to take stock of their lives — and many want to do things better, including, one would hope, the Premier and government of NSW.

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