

ARTICLE

The shifting Christian right discourse on religious freedom in Australia

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Abstract

Political debates over religious freedom in Australia became prominent in the context of marriage equality, achieved in 2017. The Australian Christian Right (ACR) has driven these debates, but there is little research focusing on its discourse of religious freedom. This article examines a range of texts from ACR actors. Using discourse and theoretical analyses, we identify three key turns in the religious freedom rhetoric of the ACR: “ontological security,” “existential stress,” and “meaning vertigo.” We also explore how mimetic ACR discourse is compared to the United States’ Christian Right (USCR). As with the USCR, this research demonstrates how the ACR—suffering meaning vertigo and aiming to re-secure its previously taken-for-granted worldview—has successfully reframed the discourse of religious freedom by positioning itself as a besieged minority.

Keywords: Christian right; discrimination; LGBT + rights; religious discourse; religious freedom

1. Introduction

Originating in the United States, the Christian Right has established firm roots in contemporary Australia (Wilcox and Robinson, 2018; Smith, 2021). Galvanized by an unwavering focus on conservative sexual ideology, for over half a century the Australian Christian Right (ACR) has consistently, and often successfully, stymied the enactment of legal human rights protections for minorities (Malloy, 2017; Jones, 2021). In recent history, the ACR’s overriding concern has been that public policy preserves its interests and values. Contemporary “religious freedom” debates reveal how the movement has changed its rhetoric in the midst of evolving political and social circumstances. While earlier rhetoric concentrated on a majoritarian moral discourse and assumed political power and moral influence, the movement has today adopted a “victimized” rhetoric strongly reminiscent of the United States Christian Right (USCR). The ACR claims minority status and is the leading voice for human

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rights reforms to safeguard religious freedom. Emboldened during the prime ministership of John Howard (1996–2007), the ACR sought to politically mobilize socially conservative Christians in order to align public policy, law, and culture in accordance with its moral ideology (Maddox, 2005, 2014).

Jones (2021) has charted the ACR's pre-Howard history, tracing its origins to the politics of the sexual revolution in 1970's Australia. Jones finds a consistent thread of "sexualized religious politics" has united disparate Christian activists around a "common conservative sexual ideology" in various campaigns across five decades (330). The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), in particular, shares this lineage as do several allied lobby groups and church supporters (Maddox, 2014; Malloy, 2017; Piggin and Lindner, 2020). Our examination of the discourse of religious freedom within the ACR and its supporters embraces Jones' wider historical lens and focuses attention on how sentiments *within* the ACR shape its rhetoric in response to changing social conditions. In this article we demonstrate—underlying a shift from opposition to human rights measures safeguarding religious non-discrimination to endorsement of such measures—the ACR's consistent efforts to defend and advance its favored sexual ideology, which is cis-hetero-normative (Richardson-Self, 2018). Resultantly, recent legislative proposals on religious freedom may serve to impede, not advance, human rights in Australia.

Australian scholarship is only beginning to grapple with the recent rise to prominence of the ACR's "religious freedom" discourse. Yet changes in the religious freedom rhetoric of the USCR are more thoroughly analyzed. Studies have pointed out a dramatic shift in the substance of USCR discourse from "moral and family values"-based arguments to a liberal discourse of rights-based claims (Miller, 2014; Djupe *et al.*, 2016; Lewis, 2017; Wilson and Djupe, 2020). Theorists evaluate such shifts as either *opportunity* or *effect*. *Opportunity* considers how discourse adapts in response to changing environmental factors. For instance, the USCR became increasingly conscious that its majoritarian, family values rhetoric was losing political traction during debates over LGBTQ+ rights, including marriage equality (Lewis, 2017; Williams, 2018). Foreseeing legal defeats and waning public support, the USCR embraced a rights-based discourse (Bennett, 2017; Hollis-Brusky and Wilson, 2020). The ACR has done the same. Another focal point is the *effect* of changing discourse: what political outcomes arise from rights-based arguments versus appeals to religious or moral values (Djupe, 2015; Djupe *et al.*, 2016; Lewis, 2017)? Further, what effect does rights-based language produce on political tolerance (Wilson and Djupe, 2020)?

Our theoretical and interpretive analysis of ACR discourse pursues questions related to opportunity and effect but with close attention to how certain rhetorical shifts reveal insights into a movement's tacit assumptions about the world and the affective tenor social upheaval brings. While a movement may strategically or tactically exploit contextual opportunities, from its choices of language, we can nonetheless glean group-based motivating affects. This article identifies three key affect-laden movements in the discourse of the ACR: "ontological security," "existential stress," and "meaning vertigo." First, we present the methodological approach of this study. Next, we provide empirical evidence and theoretical analysis of these discursive turns. In the discussion, we demonstrate that the ACR's rhetoric has mimicked the USCR's and highlight some socio-legal implications arising from the ACR's religious freedom agenda in Australia.

2. Method

2.1. Theoretical

Our theoretical approach to the analysis of the empirical data was as follows. First, our aim was to evaluate whether the ACR (and Christians more broadly) is indeed subject to rights-violating discrimination on grounds of freedom of speech and freedom of belief in Australia. We note “normative reflection must begin from historically specific circumstances because there is nothing but what is, the given, the situated interest in justice, from which to start” (Young, 1990, 5). Thus, we sought to find *historical* (e.g., Maddox, 2005; Furse-Roberts, 2010; Piggin and Lindner, 2020; Jones, 2021), *contextual* (Hilliard, 1995; Melleuish, 2002; Bouma, 2011, 2012; Maddox, 2014, 2015; Grube and van Acker, 2017; Brennan, 2019; Wilson and Djupe, 2020), *socio-political* (Young, 1990; Thornton and Luker, 2010; Nelson *et al.*, 2012; Lewis, 2017; Ngo, 2017; Richardson-Self, 2018; Lopes, 2019; Ezzy *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b), *legal* (Sharp, 2011; Ball, 2013; Evans and Read, 2020), and *comparative* (Gin, 2012; Kettell, 2017; Malloy, 2017; Brown, 2019) scholarship to situate the contemporary claim to injustice. Second, we sought to understand the explicit and tacit meanings of ACR actors’ statements.

To that end, we employ a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the range of texts detailed below. CDA is both theory and method. It is grounded in the notion that social practices are constructed, in part through language, and as a form of critical social science, has emancipatory objectives (Fairclough, 2001). It “takes a particular interest in the relationship between language and power” (Weiss and Wodak, 2007, 12). The methodology used to code and analyze the texts in this research draws on perspectives and approaches from both media framing (e.g., Entman, 2007) and public policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009). CDA pays attention to how narratives and problems are constructed and defined to achieve political ends; thus, our analysis is likewise narrative.

We found an evolving thematic trajectory among the ACR’s discourse which is captured by (1) Young’s evaluation of social group dynamics from the center of society. We call this a state of *ontological security* facilitated by the saturation of Christian culture in Australia’s colonial history. However, (2) as marginal groups have agitated for and (partially) achieved equity and inclusion in Australian society, a kind of *existential stress* (Ngo, 2017) has affectively gripped the ACR. This has led to the sense Christianity is threatened.¹ Finally, (3) with so many changes in Australian culture over the decades—and most notably marriage equality in 2017—the ACR now appears to be in a state of *meaning vertigo* (Lopes, 2019). Meaning vertigo helpfully explains what underscores the ardent agitation for “religious freedom” in the present period. We detail each of these theoretical observations and provide empirical evidence of this interpretation of ACR actions in the analysis.

2.2. Empirical

This study draws from and builds upon the work of Poulos (2020) who identifies three distinct public discourses of religious freedom—“religious diversity,” “balancing rights,” and “freedom of belief”—used by a variety of actors including the ACR. It also draws from Jones (2021) who highlights the importance of coalition building

in the rise of the ACR. Our focus includes an analysis of a corpus of exemplary texts from prominent individuals and lobby groups, conservative religious leaders, and politicians associated or allied with the ACR. These texts were selected by identifying major ACR actors and high-profile allies. Media articles and opinion pieces (op eds) were sourced from Factiva and web searches using personal names and the search terms “religious freedom,” “freedom of religion,” and “religious liberty.” Submissions, statements, speeches, and press releases were sourced from parliamentary and organizational websites. These include speeches, articles, and opinion pieces from church leaders; submissions from church bodies to public inquiries; parliamentary speeches and opinion pieces from politicians; and articles, websites, and submissions from ACR lobby groups; 61 texts were identified for possible inclusion in the corpus.

Ensuring a representation of each of the genres and a cross-section of the major categories of actors listed above, only texts which were primarily addressing the issue of religious freedom were finally selected for analysis. The 31 exemplary texts span the years 1981 (the inaugural parliamentary speech of the Rev. Fred Nile of the Christian Democratic Party) to 2019 (an opinion piece written ahead of the 2019 federal election by conservative legal scholar and religious freedom activist Dr Augusto Zimmerman). A manual discourse coding using NVivo was conducted, with the coding refined over successive iterations to elicit the main discursive themes in relation to religious freedom evident across the selected texts. Importantly, public and political texts, such as those examined here, are critical in understanding the construction of public discourses (Fairclough, 2001). The discursive power of the narratives the ACR presents also relies on the mutual development and reinforcement of rhetoric by religious and other actors with high levels of public legitimacy.

Three major themes were identified, each made up of a number of other more specific themes. The major theme “Moral Security and Privilege” (appearing in 13 texts) includes discursive sub-themes such as “Australia is/was a Christian country” and “traditional morality is the majority moral code.” The theme “Religious Freedom and Human Rights” (20 texts) includes, for example, the sub-themes “rights must be balanced,” “religious freedom is not well protected,” and “religious freedom is a matter of international law.” The third theme “Threat” (28 texts) is identified as the most often-used rhetoric and includes such sub-themes as “secularism is a threat,” “marriage equality is a threat,” and “religious organizations are under threat.” The coding was also assessed against existing scholarship on the ACR and the matter of religious freedom in Australia (Gin, 2012; Nelson *et al.*, 2012; Poulos, 2019, 2020).

3. Analysis

Herein we show the ACR has transitioned from a conservative voice defending the privileges of the Christian majority (Ezzy *et al.*, 2021b), to a self-described minority seeking to shape social policy to buttress the movement’s conservative sexual ideology (Jones, 2021). Shifts in rhetoric suggest the ACR migrated from ontological security (pre-1970), to increased existential stress leading up to the marriage postal survey of 2017, and finally, in the wake of marriage equality legalization, to its present state of meaning vertigo, which has led to attempts to forcefully reinstate its preferred moral order.

3.1. Ontological security

Political literatures have considered how religious discourses can help groups which experience existential anxiety to “reaffirm a threatened self-identity” (Kinnvall, 2004, 742). But what comes before a group’s experience of existential anxiety? Young proposes a layered account of *group subjectivity* to understand social group dynamics. These layers are “discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, and a basic security system” (Young, 1990, 131). Discursive consciousness is what we ordinarily talk about as conscious thought—things (values, ideas, associations, etc.) which come readily to mind and are easily verbalized. Practical consciousness is not available to us in the same way; it is a “routinized background awareness that enables persons to accomplish focused, immediately purposive action,” like typing sentences on a keyboard, driving a car, or opening a door (Young, 1990, 131). At the deepest level is our basic security system, which:

designates the basic level of identity security and sense of autonomy required for any coherent action in social contexts; one might call it the subject’s ontological integrity... [This,] in its turn, involves the socially situated body in a dynamic of trust and anxiety in relation to its environment (Young, 1990, 131).

It is this deepest level we are interested in, since existing studies do not explore the role of ontological security in changes among Christian Right discourses, especially with respect to the ACR.²

Looking at the colonial history of Australia, we find Christians have heretofore enjoyed congruence at the levels of discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, and basal ontological security because Christianity has historically “saturated” Australian public and political culture (Melleuish, 2002, 80). Australia’s taken-for-granted mode of social coordination was (and to an extent, still is) a Christian one. Distinctly Christian architecture is built into the environment, from steeples to cemeteries; the nation’s great social gatherings follow a Christian calendar and/or are sacralized in Christian terms; the legal regime has often relied on Christian doctrine, for example, in regulations on divorce, censorship, laws on gambling, liquor, retail hours, and concepts of innocence, guilt, and punishment. Discursive and political practices still cement this Christian environment: reciting the Lord’s Prayer in Federal Parliament; policy and funding for (largely) Christian chaplaincy in state schools; and Christian institutions are channels of government services in health, education, welfare, and aged care (Sharp, 2011). Thus, it is easy to see how the alignment of discursive and practical morality sets up the proper conditions for basal, ontological security: a secure sense of one’s *self* and of one’s *place* in a world that is deeply, pre-consciously familiar. Christians are at ease in this world; they have “an underlying feeling of ‘at-home-ness’” which allows them to move through and act in social spaces with confidence and effortlessness (Ngo, 2017, 86).

We posit ontological security may well explain earlier Christian *antipathy* toward efforts to give stronger legal protection to religious freedom. This analysis is backed up by our data. For example, when, in 1977, New South Wales (NSW) became the first State to enact a broad anti-discrimination law, religion was omitted from

protection. Though a 1984 review of religious freedom saw the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board report on significant discrimination faced by members of *minority* religious groups and recommended adding “religion” as a protected attribute, this was *opposed* by the ACR as unnecessary and a threat to the status quo of Christian dominance. The [Baptist Union of NSW](#) argued:

We believe that the struggle for religious liberty has in large measure already been won, and that the proposed legislative action serves more to threaten the liberty of religious groups than to further the liberty of individuals who hold to particular religious convictions (1985, 1).

The Islamic Council of NSW, the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, and the progressive Uniting Church in Australia all *endorsed* the recommendation to add religion as a ground for protection against discrimination, but to no avail. Surveying a landscape strewn with failed inquiries into religious freedom protection, Catholic priest and human rights expert, Frank Brennan, noted the “appetite for such reform [has been] almost non-existent amongst the leadership of the mainstream churches” (Brennan, 2019, 35). For three decades following, the ACR resisted proposals for legislative protections for religious freedom, confident in the Christian privilege cemented in the status quo, and suspicious of proposals for more anti-discrimination protections that might benefit minority religious groups and restrict their own freedom to discriminate.

This pattern has been observed by previous researchers. In a study of submissions to the 2008–2009 inquiry into religious freedom by the Australian Human Rights Commission (Bouma *et al.*, 2011), Nelson *et al.* concluded “Christian groups defined the nation and culture in their own terms, advocating their privilege and justifying their own exemptions from discrimination instruments” (2012, 302). Likewise, Ball recounts “the most organised and effective ‘No’ campaign” against a comprehensive federal Human Rights Act (or Bill/Charter of Rights) during the 2009 National Human Rights Consultation arose from Christian groups, including the ACL, the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, and the Life, Marriage and Family Centre of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney (2013, 1). The ACL, for example, argued in its submission “Australia’s excellent human rights record shows that its approach to protecting human rights works well without a bill or charter of rights” (in Brennan *et al.*, 2009, 283).³

The ACR’s approach to religious freedom protection was not merely an absence of positive support, but an energetic opposition movement. ACR investment in blocking legal protection for religious freedom warrants explanation since it now maintains a much different stance, with its demands to protect religious *freedom* growing increasingly more insistent and strident as it realized its discursive and practical taken-for-granted worldview was crumbling. ACR rhetoric also belies a tacit self-interest since it did not fight to strengthen protections for other religions.⁴

3.2. *Existential stress*

The ACR’s newfound advocacy for protection seems to be triggered by “existential stress.” The experience almost certainly involves a pre-reflective sense of alienation,

betrayal, abandonment, displacement, and even rage, among a group (Brown, 2019, 3).⁵ The corporeal affects one's experiences when one's worldview starts to crumble as described by Ngo as "an anxiety so deep that it...is one connected to a profound loss of self," or, rather, a loss of one's self in the world as they knew their world (2017, 61). People suffer existential stress when they feel their identity, their very personhood, is under threat.

The language of "threat" has been brewing in the discourse of ACR campaigns at least since the 1970s (Maddox, 2014); this betrays existential stress. The above noted affective currents are evident in ACR discourse. For example, conservative law professor and religious freedom advocate Augusto Zimmerman (2019) claimed:

Here in Australia we see a subtle persecution of Christians. For example, if an Australian believes in the teachings of the Bible and says so publicly, he or she should be prepared to be mocked and ridiculed by many, including some of our own political leaders. And if a Christian school upholds social beliefs based on traditional Christian values, this school might be denied government funding and be accused of breaching anti-discrimination laws.

To be more specific, the ACR's perception of the centrality of their religious tenets to Australia's moral code has cracked and crumbled with every "progressive" shift toward secularism, racial and religious diversity, and changing norms regarding sex, gender, and the family.

Dan Tehan MP, a conservative Christian politician who served in multiple ministries from 2016 to 2022, captured this process of alienation in an op ed (2018) when he was the federal Minister for Social Affairs:

The reality for Australians today is that there is another threat to religious freedom and it does not come from the application of various laws. Rather, it comes from what former prime minister John Howard calls "minority fundamentalism," which he describes as "the assumption that long-held custom, practices and beliefs represent or imply an attack on those who do not support [them]."

However, there seem to be almost no examples of experiences of concrete harm suffered by conservative Christians.⁶

Threat rhetoric builds a *sense* of harm and potential persecution through the anticipation of legal requirements (and societal pressure) to not engage in formerly taken-for-granted discriminatory practices. Our analysis reveals existential anxiety has been concurrently cultivated in three areas by the ACR's rhetoric on (1) the threat from secularism; (2) the threat from diversity and pluralism; and (3) the threat from sexual equality.

3.2.1. *Threat from secularism*

In his inaugural speech to the NSW Parliament (1981), Rev. Frederick Nile warned of the threat to Australian society posed by secular humanism, stating: "Secular humanism...has made serious inroads in our State [NSW]... I believe sincerely in the separation of church and state. But I do not accept the separation of faith and state. No

nation can live or survive for very long in a spiritual and moral vacuum” (3). More recently, Freedom for Faith (FFF) took aim at secularism. FFF head Patrick Parkinson (a family law expert) opined, “freedom of religion and conscience... have been respected in Australia until recently, but they are under challenge from an extreme and dogmatic secularism which demonstrates little respect for religious faith and which sometimes actively opposes it” (2010, 4). Presaging what would become the defining discourse of the ACR, FFF set out a “national agenda for religious freedom” (Parkinson, 2010) demanding the Federal Government protect religious freedom via legislation against the threats posed by secularism. In its submission to the Religious Freedom Review (the Ruddock Review), FFF argued:

There is increasing evidence of such hatred against people of faith across the secular western world and that includes examples from Australia. It is experienced by Christians of all denominations who hold to traditional beliefs and values on sexual ethics, family life, and ethics concerning the beginning and end of life (2018, 8).

Consider also the remarks of Rona Joyner, one of the leading ACR figures and moral campaigners in the 1970s. In a speech to high school students, she stated:

The breakdown of the family, rather than poverty, race or any other factor, is now being almost universally cited as the real root cause of rising rates of drug abuse, teen suicide, abortion, academic failure, welfare dependency, and violent crime.

However, as I have been pointing out for 26 years, *it was the humanist school curricula* since World War II that ousted the Christian philosophy in State education and had the most damaging effect on families and society.

This preceded the breakdown of the family and actually undermined parental authority and Christian absolutes so severely as to be the real cause behind the root cause⁷ (1996, emphasis added).

Adding the Roman Catholic Church’s voice to the public commentary, the Archbishop of Sydney, Anthony Fisher, in an article entitled “Religious freedom threatened by air of militant secularism” argued:

For all its putative open-mindedness and despite its profound debt to Judeo-Christianity for its laws and customs, our culture is less and less tolerant of such religion. Will people in parishes, church schools and other faith institutions, let alone in the more public square, be free in [the] future to hold, speak and practice their beliefs? (2018)

But is Christianity (now or then) actually at risk of central cultural displacement? There is little-to-no evidence of this.⁸

On the structural level, Christianity—including the ACR—is deeply entrenched in economics, housing, employment, as we have already noted, not to mention its political clout (Maddox, 2005; Malloy, 2017). Recall mainstream Christian denominations,

including Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches sometimes partner with ACR lobbyists and church partners—that provide significant services in government sectors such as education, social welfare, health care, and aged care, employing about one-third of the government workforce (Ezzy *et al.*, 2021a)—and this gives the ACR a central role in representing Christianity in politics.

3.2.2. *Threat from diversity and pluralism*

Australian society, like other liberal Western democracies, has had to grapple with rising diversity and pluralism. Public inquiries into religious freedom, from the first in 1984 until 2011, were motivated by the experiences of prejudice and discrimination faced by people from minority religions. These minority groups were positioned in ACR discourse as threats to normal life (which, again, implies the cultural dominance of Christianity). In a response to the 1984 [NSW Anti-Discrimination Board Report](#), [Gordon Moyes](#), former Superintendent for Wesley Central Mission, Sydney (later an MP in the NSW Parliament representing the conservative Christian Democratic Party), criticized the attention to minority religions, stating: “The feeling is gained throughout that the *larger* religious groups in the community are there all the time only to have their rights restricted and their privileges curtailed” (1985, 1, *emphasis added*). Some 25 years later, these sentiments remained prevalent.

The national consultation on Freedom of Religion and Belief found among Christian representatives:

a high level of concern that there is too much deference to religious minorities, especially the Muslim communities, at the expense of mainstream values, and that the shift to allegedly appeasing minority groups threatens core social values. Fears were expressed about accommodating different religious laws and practices (Bouma *et al.*, 2011, 23).

This gives much credence to Bouma’s insight that a “transition from seeing one religion as dominant and ‘normal’ to a multi-faith perspective is accompanied by much contestation among those who see themselves winning or losing in the shift” (2012, 283).

3.2.3. *Threat from sexual equality rights*

Driving these campaigns has been a sense that, in an increasingly pluralistic world, the Judeo-Christian moral order is languishing, bringing with it a threat to the family. Thus, the family became a key focal point for the ACR. During the 1970s, Australian governments began to increase legal protections for women, moves castigated by the ACR as usurping traditional values, the institution of the family, and society in general. Foremost among the early ACR campaign groups was the Australian Festival of Light (AFOL), which brought together:

Fundamentalist, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic Christians... [who] found common ground in their shared opposition towards the disintegration of censorship, the liberalisation of abortion, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the introduction of “no-fault” divorce (Furse-Roberts, 2010, 49).

For the ACR, the fight for family values meant more than using the law to limit personal moral choices considered sinful.

In 1981, the introduction of a private members Bill by Labor Senator Susan Ryan, which would restrict discrimination on the grounds of sex, sparked intense opposition from the ACR (Thornton and Luker, 2010). Leading the campaign was the anti-feminist group, Women Who Want to be Women (WWWW), formed in 1979 and run by Babette Francis (Webley, 1983). The AFOL and WWWW modeled themselves on USCR counterparts such as the Mothers on the March, and Phillis Schlafly's "Stop the ERA" campaign (Webley, 1983). WWWW made it known:

women all around Australia are sick of the anti-male, anti-child feminists claiming to speak for women, and are rallying to say they are Women Who Want to be Women... Openly Christian and pro-life, WWWW is all for equal opportunity, but feels that men and women have different needs and abilities (Butler, 1980).

Alongside advances in women's rights was the increasing recognition of homosexuality as non-aberrant, the growing social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, and the increasing legal gains for LGBTQ+ people in Australia—from South Australia's decriminalization of male acts of homosexuality (the first State to do so) in 1975, to the 2013 amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act making discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people unlawful, to the federal legalization of marriage equality in 2017.

The ride to full social inclusion of LGBTQ+ people was not without its setbacks, though. The community had to withstand, for example, the existence of "the gay panic defense" to downgrade the charge of murder. There was also the longstanding arduous campaign against marriage equality. In 2009, Catholic Cardinal George Pell warned of the "redefinition of marriage [being forced] on the rest of the population through spurious rights-claims and judicial fiat" (236). In 2013, the High Court of Australia disallowed the ACT's local marriage law, a result praised by the ACL. Lyle Shelton, then Managing Director, said "If you redefine marriage you're saying yes to the proposition that it's okay for some children to be denied their natural mother and father... I think that's an injustice... I think it's time to move on" (Byrne, 2013). Federal Government action against the ACT law was legitimated by the Howard Government's 2004 amendments to the *Marriage Act 1961* (Cth) which explicitly prohibited marriage equality.

The "clash" between LGBTQ+ activists' pushback on perceived inequities and the ACR's insistence *their own rights* are under threat today is at the forefront of objections to, and support for, proposed legislation to protect religious freedom with a Religious Discrimination Act. FFF has argued:

What we are increasingly seeing is complete intolerance of views and beliefs which dissent from what some people consider to be "progressive" opinions. It is because of this level of hatred against people of faith, expressed covertly or overtly sometimes by people who hold positions of responsibility in the law, commerce, government, the education sector and elsewhere, that people

of faith are now seeking greater protection in terms of anti-discrimination and anti-detriment laws (2018, 8).

The Australian Association of Christian Schools added its voice too:

Of concern to Christian schools has been the recent change in this balance with the resultant diminishment of religious freedom rights. When the government's task of assisting society to protect the vulnerable (via anti-discrimination laws) means that particular associations, like Christian schools, can no longer have authority over their own employment and enrolment policies, the balance has swung too far (2018, 7).

We, of course, acknowledge Christianity is not a "fixed" or even singular world-ordering system. Its institutions evolve, divide, adapt; some of its traditions are conservative and others are progressive. The ACR is only one face of Christianity. But strategic alignments between the ACR and other powerful conservative Christian bodies wrongfully advance a widely held impression: the ACR represents the concerns of "Australian Christians" on religious freedom. It is their conservative form of world-ordering ideology that is becoming less dominant, not Christianity per se, but the ACR are seeking to cement it ahead of further disintegration. The ACR consider themselves, at an existential level, under (constant threat of) attack and work to convince other Christians this is the case for them, too, via this threat rhetoric.

3.3. *Meaning vertigo*

We are all socially embedded agents, and we are always implicated in social practices. It is through this constant embedding and that we create and internalize social meanings. These "are necessary for meaningful and fluid social action, interaction and coordination," Lopes tells us (2019, 2530). Indeed, social meaning "is crucial to guiding our action and interaction with others and with the material world" (Lopes, 2019, 2530):

A social meaning...has significance by virtue of our collective cultural understandings... Social meanings are [thus] the basis of social practice and coordination. They are shared, non-optional and they therefore constitute a necessary "cultural backdrop" to our activities together (2019, 2529–2530).

Social meanings which orient our everyday actions "are implicated in scripts and schemas for a multitude of social roles and positions" (Lopes, 2019, 2530)—that is to say, the ways we encounter one another and live our lives are, to a large extent, *scripted*; we follow a socially normative pattern.

By 2017 in Australia, the social script had well and truly turned in favor of social meanings and new norms that were inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community, including marriage equality. But as Scott Morrison MP (soon to become Australia's first Pentecostal Prime Minister) reminded us shortly after Australia's marriage postal survey:

There are almost five million Australians who voted No in this survey who are now coming to terms with the fact that *they* are in the minority.⁹ That did not used to be the case in this country for most, if not all, of their lives. They have concerns that their broader views and beliefs are also now in the minority *and therefore under threat*. They are seeking assurances from this House and this parliament at this time—whether one agrees or disagrees and whether rightly or wrongly—that the things they hold dear are not under threat because of this change (Commonwealth Parliament of Australia [Hansard], 2017b, 12347, emphasis added).

From here we start to see evidence the ACR had reached the tipping point where existential stress turns into meaning vertigo. We can clearly see that a conflation appears that is evident of cognitive dissonance: while the ACR *are* a numerical minority, Christians are still a numerical and *normative majority* in Australia today (ABS, 2022). The spiral into meaning vertigo, a state involving hierarchical insecurity, is only possible given this conflation of kinds *and* affect-laden threat discourse.

Where members of some specific group (e.g., the ACR) feel like they are being challenged, replaced, or disregarded, hierarchical insecurity can cause forms of “lashing out” at the group who seems to (but does not really) have all the social advantages (e.g., LGBTQ+ people, cultural minorities, secularists) (Lopes, 2019, 2520). The ACR have often cast LGBTQ+ people and their rights advocates as hostile, intolerant, and abusive. A lecture by Archbishop Fisher (2015) took aim at those advocating for marriage equality and LGBTQ+ rights with a creative hypothetical scenario set in 2025: this dystopia could include the imprisonment of a Catholic Bishop “for refusing to apply the state-approved ‘LGBTIQ Safety Protocols and Awareness Program’ to the schools in his diocese,” the prosecution of clergy and teachers for “hate speech,” and of small business owners for refusing to provide services for “gay weddings” (4). A few years later, Dan Tehan MP (2018) wrote:

When the forces of political correctness continually marginalise and dismiss contributions to debate informed by a reasonable religious belief, it sends a very clear message: you are not welcome here, your views are not welcome here and your religion is not welcome here.

He goes on to describe a number of specific “attacks” against those who expressed traditional views on marriage during the marriage equality debate, and the need to “strongly defend our rights and responsibilities to take part in debates of national significance and to make contributions informed by our beliefs” (Tehan, 2018).

The appeal of this rhetoric to overcome perceived “religious discrimination” amongst conservative Christians in present-day Australia is understandable when compared to how conservative Christians once felt—namely, *ontologically secure*. During those years, for the ACR, resistance to LGBTQ+ rights discourse was aimed at protecting the status quo of cultural Christian privilege in the face of increasingly progressive moral codes (Poulos, 2018; Ezzy *et al.*, 2021b). However, as shifts in the moral codes of Australian society were finding continued support, including amongst progressive Christians, the ACR has gravitated toward “new

minority” rhetoric (Poulos, 2019) and ACR groups coalesced around a narrative of Christians under threat (Maddox, 2014; Ezzy *et al.*, 2021b). This narrative reached unprecedented intensity in 2017 during the postal survey on marriage equality and the passing of the consequent legislation (Richardson-Self, 2018; Poulos, 2021). Craig Kelly MP, for one, arguing for expansive religious freedom protections to be added to the draft marriage equality, stated:

The reason I have concerns is that we have seen in our society recently a very disturbing tendency by some groups to use threats, violence, harassment and intimidation against those who hold a different opinion. This is why I believe that those who hold what is *now* a minority religious view in this country on the issue of same-sex marriage *deserve* some religious protections’ (Commonwealth Parliament of Australia, 2017a, 12691, emphasis added).

This comment clearly frames LGBTQ+ people as aggressive enforcers of a new social moral order, lording over those in a newly vulnerable position.

But it is a matter of fact that some Christians were (and continue to be) genuinely fearful of what these social changes mean for them, and they must be taken seriously. Indeed, the Ruddock Review (2018) found:

A common characteristic of many of the representations made to the Panel was apprehension, even “fear”. People of faith were apprehensive that religious freedom may come under threat in Australia. The Panel heard many examples of changes to legislation or judicial decisions from overseas that underpinned this apprehension (10).

Fear tends to elicit risk-averse responses to social, cultural, and moral shifts and to retain a preference for the (safe) status quo (Richardson-Self, 2018). This is why we conclude marriage equality was the “tipping point” that sent the ACR into meaning vertigo.

Meaning vertigo is a specific type of hierarchical insecurity; while Lopes describes this state in relation to gender (in)equality, we have adapted it here to the religious context:

Meaning vertigo refers to this perception of a vertiginous and unsettling emptiness at the level of social meaning. It is an emptiness that seems to threaten our very ability to interact and communicate in a [religiously diverse, sexually diverse, and secularized] world. Although it may not exactly track reality, it nevertheless constitutes a very real anxiety. This in turn motivates an attempt to *reinstate* some form of clear system of [conservative Christian] meanings that is imaginable and available to be socially shared. Meaning vertigo is an unacceptable state from which we try to exit by somehow getting “on the same page” again. Note that there is an urgency to this reaction because the matter is never purely theoretical; rather, it is about getting on with one’s life (2019, 2531, original emphasis).

In short, if some collective suffers from meaning vertigo, one should expect “an urgent project of social meaning clarification” in the form of “backlash: a reactionary trend that goes from a perceived loss [of social mores] to a push for perceived compensatory action” (Lopes, 2019, 2531, 2529).

“Backlash” comes in many formations. We posit the ACR’s backlash began before the first wedding bells could toll. For example, after the success of the marriage equality postal survey, James Paterson MP proposed his more conservative *Marriage Amendment Definition and Protection of Freedoms Bill* (2017). Though unsuccessful, the meaning vertigo triggered by the “Yes” vote nonetheless entrenched the idea marriage equality is a potential threat to religious freedom, rather than being *compatible* with such freedom.¹⁰ There is more evidence in the title of the (more liberal) enacted legislation: the *Marriage Amendment (Definitions and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017* (Cth). And, after failure to win support for a more conservative marriage amendment law, the ACR began their push, in earnest, for legislated religious freedom protections, one framed by the discourses of threat discussed above. To wit, it is worth noting, in the ACR’s urgent project of social meaning clarification, actors have sought discursive and conceptual resources from culturally similar sources: particularly, the USCR.

4. Discussion: discursive mimicry and political consequences

The Christian Right, as a movement, has a transnational dimension (though each domestic expression also needs to be placed within the particulars of its national setting). We note the ACR’s discourses of religious freedom involve transnational religious influence *from* the United States *to* Australia. Two factors indicate a one-way trajectory. First, the USCR is relatively far more established and politically influential than the ACR (Malloy, 2017; Smith, 2021). Second, studies of USCR discourse on religious freedom appear ahead of Australia (see below). Therefore, it is plausible, if not likely, the ACR has applied the tactics, motifs, and rhetoric of its U.S. counterparts to its political context. We term this “mimicry.”

4.1. Evidence of mimicry

From the 1970s through the 1990s, USCR leaders portrayed their cause in terms of “a traditional majority seeking to preserve American society as we have always known it” (Lienesch, 1993, 169). Through this period, as Jelen notes, individual rights suffused American political discourse like a “sort of political Esperanto” (2005, 304) which liberals effectively harnessed to advance equality and freedoms for minorities such as women and LGBTQ+ people. First eschewing this rights rhetoric, U.S. conservative Christian discourse stressed moralistic, family, and communitarian themes anchored to an idealized white, heteronormative, Judeo-Christian past (Johnston, 1982; Jelen, 2005; Lewis, 2017). Moral majoritarianism was exhibited in USCR leader Jerry Falwell’s vow, “to stop the moral decay in America” and return the nation to its Christian heritage (Lienesch, 1993, 47), for instance.

These themes reflect a similar insecurity exhibited by the ACR which, in the early 1970s, was already borrowing from U.S. (as well as British) counterparts (Furse-Roberts, 2010). Conservative U.S. Christian activist Phyllis Schlafly was

influential in the 1970s campaign against the U.S. Equal Rights Amendment; ACR groups would later work with Schlafly's movement and employ near identical rhetoric against a Sex Discrimination Bill, first tabled by Senator Ryan in 1981, which passed into law as the Sex Discrimination Act in 1984 (Webley, 1983; Thornton and Luker, 2010). Similarly, ACR groups echoed USCR rhetoric on LGBTQ+ rights. Opposition to a proposed 1976 anti-discrimination measure for LGBTQ+ people in Dade County, FL, was spearheaded by Christians under the slogan "Save Our Children," in defense of family and national moral values (Faderman, 2015). During the first Australian parliamentary debates on marriage in 2004, an analysis of the language found that the objects of protection cited by opponents of LGBTQ+ rights were family, the institution of marriage and children (Poulos, 2020).

For both the ACR and the USCR, marriage equality was the tipping point into meaning vertigo. In 2015 filings to the U.S. Supreme Court in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (*Obergefell*), USCR legal bodies warned a decision in favor of marriage equality would become a "weapon to marginalize persons of faith" (Lewis, 2017, 155). According to Wilson and Djupe, the *Obergefell* decision became "the most dramatic inflection point" for the USCR shift from a majoritarian sensibility to promulgating the notion they are a threatened minority deserving rights protections (2020, 401). Whereas earlier USCR discourse portrayed LGBTQ+ people as a subversive threat to society at large, its new narrative centered on Christian organizations and individuals as *targets* of religious persecution. Such rhetoric shows the once "culturally dominant position" of the USCR could no longer be relied upon to "thwart the rights claims of a small, unpopular minority" (Lewis, 2017, 150). Instead, the *Obergefell* decision enshrined a new framing of religious discrimination via the "rampant LGBT agenda" (Wilson and Djupe, 2020, 400) and the USCR's majoritarian family values agenda was "recast in the rhetoric of liberalism" to maximize the appeal of their old values in a diverse, pluralistic society (Lewis, 2017, 25).

Imitating this shift, the ACR has re-packaged its values agenda into a similarly liberal rights-based language, appealing to religious freedom, diversity, and pluralism (as seen above). Subsequent ACR discourse has also employed the same tropes to maintain conservative norms.¹¹ The rhetoric persisted into the final stages of Australia's marriage equality debate. When the USCR shifted its discourse, the ACR followed suit. As noted, from around 2012 with the grassroots push for marriage equality, ACR discourse drifted away from majoritarian family values toward minority rights protections and accelerated this in 2017. A similar shift in USCR discourse is widely documented, albeit beginning earlier and reaching its zenith ahead of the ACR by two years (Lewis, 2017; Wilson and Djupe, 2020).

The central pivot point in both cases is marriage equality, but for the ACR this marked a normative shift rather than a political change of conditions. Here is where contextual sensitivity draws the USCR and the ACR apart. It is noteworthy that marriage equality in Australia was resolved by a conservative government, albeit one divided between social moderates and conservatives (Kenney, 2019), indicating that Australia lacks the firm fusion between religion and conservative mainstream politics so apparent in the United States (Smith, 2021). Partly this may stem from the absence of a federal bill of rights and the apolitical profile of courts in dealing with matters of religious freedom and LGBTQ+ anti-discrimination (Evans and

Read, 2020). Still, no changed political opportunities explain the rise of a new ACR discourse between 2011 and 2017 and beyond; the ACR's newfound focus on *rights to religious freedom* is not traceable to local political factors. Nonetheless, as the prospect of marriage equality approached, the ACR's religious freedom rhetoric escalated, mimicking an earlier pattern in the United States, and backtracking on earlier views held by the ACR that anti-discrimination legislation would be deleterious.

4.2. *The consequences of mimicry*

It is noteworthy that “rhetoric is in and of itself an institutional power that leaders can use to influence policy outcomes... [to] frame and reframe policy debates in ways that can actually change the content of those debates” (Grube and van Acker, 2017, 195). Despite its recent Damascene conversion on anti-discrimination protections, ACR discourse continues to undermine human rights protections for normative minorities, including religious and LGBTQ+ communities. Prior to this emphatic insistence on a legislatively enshrined right to religious freedom, the ACR enjoyed sufficient ontological security to deem legislation unnecessary. This rhetorical stance was instrumental in persuading governments to reject proposed religious freedom protections for minorities: in 1984 in NSW (see above); in 2009 following the successful campaign against a federal *Human Rights Act* (see above); then again in 2012 following a campaign against federal anti-discrimination law reform (Poulos, 2019). Cumulatively, this amounts to decades of lost human rights protections which would have reduced or prevented harms to normative minority religious groups and retained lawful rights to discriminate against LGBTQ+ persons in a range of settings. Rather than resolving genuine forms of religious discrimination, the ACR's recent religious freedom rhetoric suggests we will see the continued marginalization of non-Christian religious minorities, among others, at ground level.

We contend pouring old ACR wine into new “liberal rights” wineskins (Matthew 9:17) is fraught with negative consequences. ACR religious freedom discourse revolves around protecting Christian institutions and assumptions, such as propositional claims of individual conscience or institutional doctrines, in contrast to non-propositional (ecstatic, ritualistic) or material (artefact, landscape-based) religions (Poulos, 2020). A Christian-centric approach dominates recent inquiries (Poulos, 2019) despite clear evidence discrimination is much more commonly experienced by minority religious groups whose primary concern is not the freedom to denounce LGBTQ+ relationships but the right not to be vilified or attacked by virtue of their religious dress, hair, or name (Evans and Read, 2020). For example, Poulos observes the 2018 Ruddock Review “focusses entirely on issues that relate to the freedom of organisations, especially schools, and individuals (freedom of conscience), to discriminate against others on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and relationship status” (2019, 11).

Reflecting on Christian Right campaigns, Kettell observes how “the polarizing discourse of the Christian Right has had a detrimental impact on democratic civility and deliberation” in the United States (2017, 306). In Australia, constant warnings by the ACR that religious institutions and fundamental (religious) freedoms are under threat are deployed to justify proposals for sweeping legal reforms, such as a federal

Religious Freedom Act. Strongly supported by the ACR since 2018, such an Act would, as the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference submitted, “recognise religious freedom in a positive way” (2018, 13). Bringing religious freedom to the fore involves raising sufficient concerns to demonstrate the ACR’s legislative solutions are *justified*. However, comprehensive human rights protections are absent in the wake of the ACR’s campaign against a Human Rights Act. Thus, according religious rights with a positive status gives pause for concern (Evans and Read, 2020).

Indeed, the ACR’s recent turn toward the language of rights raises questions over the integrity of its position. Positioning itself as *vulnerable* (under threat) masks the reality: Christian organizations continue to exert very substantial social, political, and economic power by virtue of their historical and ongoing contribution to Australian society. Recent shifts in the ACR’s approach to rights has led some, such as Father Frank Brennan, to ruefully note of the ACR’s campaign against a legislated bill of rights: “some church leaders think that church positions on contested moral issues have a better chance of being reflected and maintained in law and policy if parliaments are not constrained by a Human Rights Act” (Ball, 2013, 18). Linger here is a suspicion the ACR’s surging religious freedom rhetoric is not a principled policy for all, but a new strategy to preserve favored moral codes in legislation. If the ACR is mimicking U.S. trends, the tactical deployment of religious freedom discourse would be another element of that picture (Kettell and Djupe, 2020). Thus, we want to highlight discursive mimicry here due to the power rhetoric can have on important policy ramifications by virtue of the capacity to change the content of religious freedom debates. These have only been noted here and deserve extensive further research.

5. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the ACR has journeyed through the stages of ontological security, existential stress, and is now in a state of hierarchical insecurity, specifically meaning vertigo, trying to enshrine its taken-for-granted worldview in legislature. Our analysis of ACR discourse from bodies, organizations, figureheads, and relatedly conservative persons, from approximately the mid-1970s to this day, has demonstrated discursive shifts alongside this evolution and has exposed the unmistakable similarities between the USCR’s rhetoric and Australia’s own.

Two pressing concerns underlie this analysis. First, and most significantly, rhetoric is a form of power that can be institutionalized and weaponized. Given the influence of the ACR and its connections with religious bodies and political figures, what is being said about *religious freedom* (who is being “freed” and for what purpose?) and what counts for *religious discrimination* (is it discrimination *perpetrated* by religious groups and individuals, or is it discrimination being experienced *by* religious people as a result of their religion?) matters in the political sphere and can have tangible, harmful outcomes. This leads to the second point: the choice of language may re-frame policy debates in ways that can actually change the content of those debates, meaning other issues drop from sight. Hence, we must pay close attention to structural power in policy development.

However, there is a silver-lining: since USCR rhetoric precedes ACR discourse, we—in Australia—might anticipate the discursive turns of the ACR and look for moments to respond creatively, and even pre-emptively.

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Notes

1. We acknowledge the use of “threat discourse” is not isolated to Christian Right groups. Nonetheless, such discourse, in this context, is symptomatic of existential stress.
2. Kinvall (2004) mentions Christianity only twice.
3. The National Human Rights Consultation website has been archived and some submissions, including the ACL’s, are no longer accessible for further analysis (see <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20090929162039/https://www.humanrightsconsultation.gov.au/www/nhrcc/submissions.nsf/category?OpenView>).
4. See, for example, Iner (2019); annual anti-Semitism reports from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, <https://www.ecaj.org.au/antisemitism-report/> (accessed November 7, 2021); and reports from the Australian Human Rights Commission, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/projects/freedom-religion-and-belief> and <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/sharing-stories-australian-muslims-2021> (accessed November 7, 2021).
5. To be clear, we are not arguing members of the ACR are experiencing the equivalent of the existential stresses of, for example, racism, sexism, or queerphobia. Rather, we postulate *they take themselves to be having some such experience*.
6. The 2018 Religious Freedom Review established by the conservative Turnbull government received over 15,000 submissions and found little evidence of the persecution of Christians in Australia beyond a small number of high-profile cases relating to challenges to discriminatory speech (Ruddock, 2018).
7. We further discuss sexual equality and the family below.
8. Although 38.9% of Australians nominated “no religion” in the 2021 census, nonetheless “Christianity is the most common religion in Australia, with over 40 per cent (43.9 per cent) identifying as Christian” (ABS, 2022).
9. Note that literature on the USCR often deploys similar “minority” rhetoric as opportunistic or strategically adaptive to changing circumstances; however, accounts of this under-appreciate the affective dimension of the discourse. Rather, threat discourse is better understood as triggered by the existential stress described above, a symptom of what Lopes calls “hierarchical insecurity.”
10. Most recently, this has resulted in the formation of a breakaway Anglican diocese described as a “lifeboat” for those who cannot live under the oversight of bishops who may allow the blessing (not even the marriage) of same-sex couples. The language of “lifeboat,” of course, speaks to a profound sense of existential threat (https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-17/australia-anglican-church-splits-over-same-sex-marriage/101341078?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web).
11. Early ACR campaigns against homosexual decriminalization “were principally driven by the conviction that [such] developments were deemed to be detrimental to the welfare of the family” (Furse-Roberts, 2010, 49).

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