# The Art of Inclusion Diversity Council Australia logoTranscript

## Season 2 - Episode 7 – In good faith

## *Religion in modern Australia*

### Edward Santow

Freedom of religion is something that I think we all as a community take really seriously and there's plenty of evidence from that in inquiries and surveys and that sort of thing. But our laws are pretty piecemeal.

### Andrew Maxwell

That's human rights commissioner Edward Santow talking about the laws around freedom of religion. They're not piecemeal anymore. In fact, a new draft of religious freedom legislation is being discussed and it's focusing our attention on exactly how we can create environments at work that respect an individual's right to their religious faith while still upholding the dignity and rights of others.

I'm Andrew Maxwell and I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land, to the elders past, present and emerging on whose country this recording is taking place. This is the Art of Inclusion, a podcast from Diversity Council Australia or DCA. In our second series, we peer into the lives of fascinating people whose individual stories create the tapestry of diversity in Australian workplaces.

In this episode, we share the experience of people of faith as they illuminate what it means for people to experience religious inclusion at work, an aspiration for all of us as it benefits individuals, organisations, and communities alike. Later in the podcast we touch on the related matter of religious freedom, an issue first highlighted with marriage equality and later made more famous by Israel Folau who used Twitter to express his controversial views on people he labelled as destined for hell.

While, the Folau matter is before the courts and a new draft of religious freedom legislation is before parliament, we'd like to explain why DCA prefers to focus on religious inclusion. And how calls for religious freedom, as understood by some in the community run the very real risk of undermining the important work we have done as a society to create inclusion for all religious and nonreligious alike.

But first, we answer a key question. What's it like to be a believer amid such strong discussions of faith? Answering these is lawyer and Maronite Catholic Daniel Wakim, who says there's a gulf between the reality of being a Christian and other people's perceptions. Here's Daniel.

### Daniel Wakim

If I was to live a Catholic life respecting everybody, I shouldn't offend anyone, irrespective of what I believe to be a sin or not. If someone is indifferent to me, I still need to treat that person as the human that they are. Otherwise, I'm not Christian. That's the reality. People expect you to be … to judge those different to you. To take your pitchfork out and cast them into the street and say you’re going to perish in hell forever. That's silly for anyone to think that's what Christians think. That's a fallacy I think presented through fictional genres.

### Andrew Maxwell

Despite the fiction that Daniel believes some people engage with, the impact on his behaviour and practise of faith is real.

### Daniel Wakim

So you’re just a bit more reserved as to not to offend people because I think most faiths don't want to offend people. But if you do publicly speak about your faith, you are offending. I think that's sort of the personal challenges that I've faced. And again, I've just looked myself in the mirror. I'm proud of who I am. I don't disrespect or treat anyone indifferent to myself or how I want to be treated. So I move on with it.

### Andrew Maxwell

One of the ways Daniel moves on is expressing his religious identity in small personal ways.

### Daniel Wakim

I've got my little crucifix in my office. I've got a little statue of the Virgin Mary. I suppose I'm not really presenting it largely, but I do have symbolism of my faith to remind me of who I am in my office. Nobody's ever said anything to me about it. I don't have a massive crucifix on my door that you're walking into a church. So that'd be a bit extreme, I think. But no, I do have things that remind me in there, and I think it's all common sense, really.

### Andrew Maxwell

For Daniel, representations of faith are limited to his office. But for practising Muslims like Mariam Veiszadeh religion is more visual and encompassing.

### Mariam Veiszadeh

I'm visibly Muslim and there are many faiths in which there is I suppose, a physical element to their faith and it becomes apparent when you first see them. Interestingly, sometimes it is politicised, a religious garment can be politicised, as we know. And sometimes, I feel like my headscarf walks into the room before I do and hence the judgements and perhaps preconceptions and stereotypes and those kinds of things.

### Andrew Maxwell

One of the most common preconceptions associates Islam with terror. Perhaps because of common flaw of human reasoning is, we often group individuals together, especially those who are different from us. We then see each individual as being representative of the whole group as if they are all one and the same.

### Mariam Veiszadeh

I remember when September 11th happened. I was suddenly, and I wasn't wearing a headscarf back then, but the next day or the following days at school I was in year 11 I think, or year 12, and I remember being questioned about not just my faith but my background. Saying oh, your country is going to be bombed because I'm from Afghanistan. So yeah, there is this... And I'm thinking, well what have I got to do when something that's happened overseas. But yes, absolutely you do feel the pressure to be the spokesperson or to be the representative.

### Andrew Maxwell

She also feels people have different expectations for Muslims in the community.

### Mariam Veiszadeh

You do feel like the bar is much higher for people from certain minority groups and that you do feel like you have to walk on eggshells. That you've got to be conscious of your words. And sometimes, something comes out and you don't mean it like that, but it's already, the certain segments of the media will jump on it. And if those words were uttered by someone else, I suspect it wouldn't have the same reaction.

So absolutely, and that probably applies in a workplace context as well. People probably feel paranoid about their words being misinterpreted or their actions being misinterpreted and it's part of the larger narrative around Muslims or culturally diverse people or minority groups.

### Andrew Maxwell

Mariamsuggests that a great way to educate people to the realities of the Islamic faith is to highlight the diversity that exists from within it.

### Mariam Veiszadeh

There is a huge diversity of views, diversity of interpretations, and that is a beautiful thing. It's just, I suppose recognising that no one individual can be truly representative. I'm certainly not, and I always put that caveat out there.

### Andrew Maxwell

Edward Santow, Australia's human rights commissioner, says that his data shows the misconceptions and misunderstandings of faith described by Mariam and Daniel aren't necessarily indicative of a problem with religious discrimination.

### Edward Santow

Freedom of religion is something that I think we all as a community take really seriously. There's plenty of evidence from that in inquiries and surveys and that sort of thing. The reason I bring all of that up is that we get very few complaints under our religion jurisdiction. It's less than one percent of the total number of complaints are about people who believe that they've been discriminated against on the basis of their religion.

### Andrew Maxwell

Edward outlines what discrimination looks like.

### Edward Santow

In practise, it means for example, someone who may be a Christian or a Muslim or adheres to some religion and usually they do so in a visible way and they've suffered because of that. They may be told you can't wear, if you're a Muslim, you can't wear a headscarf. If you're a Christian you may be told you can't wear a cross or a crucifix in a visible way. And that's something where you would say, well, that's in principle going to impinge on someone's right to religious belief.

### Andrew Maxwell

In the context of the workplace, Edward Santow says that being inclusive of faith doesn't need to be something that causes upheaval.

### Edward Santow

Just think in really, really practical ways about how you can accommodate people's different needs. The first is removing discriminatory barriers and that's the bare minimum because you want to make sure that there's nothing that is actively going to make life harder for someone because of something they can't control. But the second thing as you say is taking positive steps. And so we've seen that in a number of workplaces across Australia where for example, they're creating spaces where people of particular faiths can pray during the day. That's something that is really important to them for their particular religious needs. And that's something that they might not be required to do, but it certainly sends a really important message that that aspect of their makeup is valued. It's taken seriously and the company has done something to just make that simple.

### Andrew Maxwell

And if managers do find themselves having to deal with discrimination, Edward has some clear advice.

### Edward Santow

Much like the advice that a doctor will give you, which is that prevention is better than a cure, that's true in human rights terms as well. That if you can avoid a complaint of discrimination, you're doing a huge favour to your future self. So, actually being proactive about setting out what those principles are in a team that you might manage, is I think really, really useful.

And then then the last thing is, if you get to the point where you're actually having to intervene in a complaint, being really, really clear on getting to grips with what actually happened and applying both the law of the land and whatever their policies are of the organisation really honestly, fairly and openly.

### Andrew Maxwell

Edward says there is plenty of useful information and practical advice on the Human Rights Commission's website. And here at DCA, we also have some resources to help workplaces prevent problems before they arise. More details are in the show notes. And now, it's back to Edward for some more advice.

### Edward Santow

The next thing I would say is people look to their supervisor or manager to show principled leadership. So to be really, really clear on what are the principles of the organisation. That's really, really important without necessarily rubbing any individual’s nose in it, but by saying, look, we recognise the importance of being inclusive. We recognise the importance of freedom of religion. We also recognise the importance of people going about their lives without necessarily constantly thinking about making everybody else feel comfortable.

### Andrew Maxwell

The benefits of doing so are great.

### Edward Santow

There are real enlightened self-interest benefits in actually saying, okay, well we're going to be inclusive. We want to open the doors in a really active way to people of all different faiths, creeds, colours and shapes and sizes.

### Andrew Maxwell

Diversity Council Australia, CEO, Lisa Annese, echoes this view of the importance of inclusion.

### Lisa Annese

We know the value of inclusion to workplaces and we want to see religious inclusion, especially in workplaces. And what I mean by religious inclusion, is moving beyond just complying with the law to actively including people of different beliefs and elevating the quality of conversation we've been having about religion and work.

### Andrew Maxwell

There's another conversation happening, the one responding to the government's draft religious freedoms bill and the concerns many have that it will undermine the principles of inclusion.

### Lisa Annese

We absolutely think people shouldn't be discriminated against because of their faith, but at the same time, we know that using faith as a reason genuinely held or not to discriminate against others isn't good for inclusion. We have a concern that the direction of the current debate on religious freedoms is heading down a path that will discriminate against groups that have already had a history of being marginalised: women, people with disabilities, and people who are LGBTIQ+.

Under the principles of inclusion, we can balance religion with other human rights. In fact, at DCA we've developed a guide for members to help them build multi-faith inclusion into their workplaces and a framework to do exactly this. What the guide says is, yes, while navigating faith and religion at work is complex, the starting point should always be that of mutual respect. You can ask yourself, is the workplace being respectful and inclusive? I think this is a message that our political leaders could also be heeding.

### Andrew Maxwell

Coming back to the faithful, Mariam has some advice.

### Mariam Veiszadeh

You know what ultimately, it depends on the organisation that you work for. I empathise with someone who may feel those thoughts early on in their career or depending on the organisation as I said. I think it's just about ultimately, of course, we should bring our whole selves to work. We should absolutely do that.

### Andrew Maxwell

And Daniel is equally optimistic and inclusive.

### Daniel Wakim

Appreciate who you are, be proud of who you are, but don't do it too... It's not fashion. I'm not presenting myself as the fashionable Christian to go out there and make you who isn't a Christian feel bad about yourself. No. It's a practise. It's a way of life.

### Andrew Maxwell

The Art of Inclusion is a podcast from Diversity Council Australia, Andrea Maltman Rivera and Sam Loy are the Producers and Lisa Annese is the Executive Producer. This episode had contributions from Mariam Veiszadeh.

You can keep the conversation going by reaching out on our Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter pages. If you like what you heard, check out the first season of the Art of Inclusion, either from the DCA website, dca.org.au or from your favourite podcast player.

On our website, you can access related DCA research and training materials, including our unconscious bias materials, the inclusive leadership resources, the inclusion at work index, and our words at work inclusive language guides. I'm Andrew Maxwell. Thanks for listening.