

SUPPLEMENTARY STATEMENT BY BRENDAN BYRNE

TO THE

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF CULTS AND ORGANISED
FRINGE GROUPS**

1. On the 17th November, 2025, I appeared (with other witnesses) before the abovementioned Committee in my role as Chaplaincy Co-ordinator at the University of Melbourne in order to provide evidence to the Committee's Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups.

2. During the course of the aforementioned hearing, Committee member Rachel Westaway asked me the following question¹:

Reverend Byrne, I would like to just tap further into what our Deputy Chair and also Cindy McLeish asked, and that is: how do you know they are cults? From the evidence that you have provided, you seem quite in touch with the amount of approaches that many of the students on campus have received, and I am keen to understand where your confidence comes from in believing that they are a cult when somebody may in fact be overly friendly and randomly invite you to dinner. Whilst that might be highly unusual, what makes you feel that they are cults?

3. I began my response to this question with the following words²:

Well, my answer to that comes in two parts.

4. Unfortunately, Ms Westaway proceeded to ask her next question of me before I was able to provide the second part of my intended answer. Accordingly, as I feel it is important that my position in relation to this question is fully and accurately recorded, and also for the information of the Committee members, I wish to provide the intended second part of my answer in this Supplementary Statement to the Committee.

5. The second part of my intended answer to Ms Westaway's question would have been to the following effect:

The second part of my answer is that the question of conflation is important to this issue. The essential difference between a legitimate faith group and a cult is that a faith group seeks to provide people with a framework for meaning-making that in turn enables them to encounter both the world and all the realities of what it means to be human in such a way as enables them to grow and develop as a human being. A cult, on the other hand, seeks to do the exact opposite: it seeks to make itself, not only the centre of someone's world, but the whole of their world, so that there are no other sources of authority or information beyond the cult itself. A cult is not interested in human growth; it is interested only in reducing humans to the paranoid, insular dimensions of the cult itself. So when I am talking to a student about cult recruitment tactics and methods and that student says to me something like, "Oh, by a cult, do you mean..." and they proceed to name some prominent or well-known faith community or church or

¹ As recorded in the proof draft of the transcript.

² As recorded in the proof draft of the transcript.

congregation – in other words, they have experienced their encounter with a legitimate faith group as cult-like – that tells me that confusion between cults and mainline religious groups is not just a matter of cults assuming the guise of legitimate faith communities. That tells me that legitimate faith communities need to do some reflecting on the ways in which they engage the wider community, and the ways in which that engagement might be providing unwitting cover to cults by creating false impressions in the public mind.

6. I trust that in providing this Supplementary Statement I have been able to further and usefully inform the Inquiry, and the deliberations of the Committee. I would be happy to answer any further questions the Committee may have in relation to this Statement.

Rev. Brendan Byrne
Chaplaincy Co-ordinator – University of Melbourne
Wednesday, 26 November 2025