

Religious freedom under the spotlight

Two leading thinkers are set to contrast their views at ACU

■ David Ryan

A FORMER US ambassador for religious freedom appointed by President Barack Obama will debate ACU Vice Chancellor Greg Craven in Sydney in March on religious freedom.

Rabbi David Saperstein, President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and former US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom from 2015-2017 will debate Prof Craven on 16 March.

He will also be part of a panel discussion on the topic which has shot to the centre of public debate in Australia over the last two years.

The debate and panel discussion are part of ACU's ongoing 'Rules of Engagement' series and will be held at the ACU North Sydney Campus.

"There is a fundamental principle of people being able to live out their lives in accordance with their religious beliefs," Rabbi Saperstein told *The Catholic Weekly* in a phone interview this week.

"People should not be forced to violate their religious beliefs."

However he also emphasised the importance of religious communities not seeking to enforce their beliefs on other communities with differing beliefs.

"People of differing practices however should not be compelled to give sanction or stamp of approval to practices of others."

For Rabbi Saperstein, the conflict of these two moral principles are the crux of the current debate on religious freedom.

"There are two valid moral principles that are in ten-



Rabbi Saperstein, at left, was President Obama's Ambassador for Religious Freedom from 2015-2017.

sion with each other," he said. "Whenever two valid moral principles are in tension you have to find some balancing principle that hopefully will embody as much as possible both of those; that's what we're grappling with now."

"That's what this [Australian] Bill is intending to address and it shows just how difficult it is to balance this."

However he highlighted the importance of good religious freedom laws for human flourishing.

"Religious freedom goes to a core aspect of human life. People should freely be able to engage in rituals practices and beliefs that peace fully express those core beliefs of human existence," he said.

"The vast majority of coun-



People should not be forced to violate their religious beliefs ... [but] religious communities should not seek to enforce their beliefs on others ... [Australia's planned religious freedom] Bill shows just how difficult it is to balance this"

tries across the globe have provision in their constitutions that protect religious freedom."

"I will be learning a lot of what the Catholic Community in Australia feels about this balancing act and how it affirms these different principles and weighs them out and it should lead to some interesting stuff," said Rabbi Saperstein.

The debate and panel discussion entitled 'Religious Freedom: Where do we draw the limits?' will be held in the Peter Cosgrove Centre at Tensson Woods House, commencing at 5.30pm.

Other participants will include Dr Michael Casey, the Director of the PM Glynn Institute and ACU Deputy Vice-Chancellor Hayden Ramsay.