IT is so self-congratulatingly easy for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to accuse us of racism towards asylum seekers.

But now HREOC admits that a good number of those asylum seekers -- particularly Muslims -- are themselves racist, persecuting others who don't share their faith.

It's a pity it doesn't then ask the obvious question in its new report, A Last Resort?: Is it wise for a largely Christian land to let in people who hate Christians and other non-Muslims?

Let's be clear: Many Muslims in fact get along fine with Christians, Jews and others. Not all asylum seekers are racist.

But now let me quote from HREOC's report on its inquiry into children in our detention centres.

A Last Resort? cites many witnesses who confirm that Muslims in most detention centres have persecuted Christians and Sabian Mandaeans, people of a Middle Eastern faith that borrows from Christianity.

In three centres, the persecution was so bad that non-Muslims had to be given protection.

For instance, A Last Resort? notes: `A Christian mother reported
to the South Australian child protection agency that she was persecuted by Muslims in the detention centre because of her religious beliefs.

``They view her as unclean and she was assaulted by a Muslim detainee when she tried to pass food to him while she was working in the detention centre kitchen.''

A Last Resort? continues: ```When the Inquiry visited Curtin, Port Hedland and Woomera, Sabian Mandaean families complained about their treatment at the hands of some Muslim detainees housed in the same compounds.

``As well as physical assaults, Sabian Mandaean families complained of verbal abuse (being called `untouchable' and `unclean').'''

A priest said Sabian Mandaean children at Woomera ```are constantly subjected to verbal harassment by both adults and peers . . .

``It is not uncommon for the Muslim child to be instructed by his or her parents to inform the (Mandaean) child that the (Mandaean) is not to touch the Muslim, nor to share food, or to be in any sort of contact.''

In Woomera, one mother said she tried to fit in with Muslim families, but ```she and her children felt so harassed that (the centre's staff) eventually moved them to a different compound for their own safety'.

South Australia's Human Services Department told HREOC another family felt ```ostracised/persecuted within the centre because they belong to John the Baptist Church'.

``The family report that the children are called names, pushed around and taunted. The parents are not accepted by `social groups' in camp because they are considered `dirty, unclean because (they) aren't Muslim'. Other detainees won't eat with the family in the shared food hall.''

Sabian Mandaeans in Port Hedland also ```agreed to be housed separately because the situation became dangerous'. As the Sabian Mandaean Association told HREOC: ```They were threatened with death, basically.''

In Baxter, the Immigration Department had to move 12 families from
``minority religions'' to a separate compound.

``Some families stated that they felt safe for the first time,'' HREOC said.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese Muslim Association, whose boss is the spokesman for the Grand Mufti of Australia, objected to Christian priests converting Muslims in detention centres. How dare Christians interfere with ``the preservation of (Muslims') original religion and culture''?

After telling us this and much more, A Last Resort? suggests some solutions -- perhaps ``educational programs for children on the importance of tolerance'' or ``training for detainees and staff setting out how to treat people of different religions and the consequences of the failure to do so under Australian law''.

Good Lord, is that all the protection we can hope for as we let in people with such intolerance of non-believers? Now that we're importing this hatred, can HREOC urgently investigate the rights of Australians to protect our open culture and easy-going ways?

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