

Beyond homophobia, toward new terms of debate

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[The worldwide Anglican crisis] 'is clearly about homosexuality and "the visceral fear" it engenders. "Absent that match, and the tinder does not catch fire."
[David Marr, citing Jim Naughton]

It is difficult to write this briefing about homosexuality. The difficulty is not because of the inevitable conflict that arises when we touch upon a 'white-hot' issue within our community. Rather, the problem is that to do so inevitably singles out homosexuals.

For many years, they have fought to be treated as no more nor less than anyone else in our society. Inevitably then, when a Christian leader disagrees with some homosexual claims, it becomes easy to denounce Christians as being 'obsessed' with this matter out of all proportion. The standard account is that we do so out of the 'visceral fear' that homosexuality engenders. In other words, we do so because we are homophobes.

This briefing is a little different, for several reasons.

First, I will take the unusual step of writing from a first-person perspective. I am one voice in an ongoing discussion within a Christian community. I have not consulted anyone in St Andrew's House; and although I work at Moore College, I have not felt the need to 'run it by' anyone here either.

Second, I am acutely aware of the existential experiences that make this issue white-hot. I do not raise it lightly. I have begun to see how much it matters for homosexual people and for those who love them.

Third, this briefing will include an edited version of a briefing numbered #075, which was emailed to our subscribers but was a bit too complicated to release on the web. Hopefully this version will be simpler, and will include some extra comments.

But why raise the matter at all? Am I singling out homosexuals in a way that indicates I am homophobic? I think the answer is 'no'. I can point to the following datum as evidence. We have released over eighty briefings since 2004 (never mind our numbering system!). Only four (#072 & #074-#076) have directly addressed homosexuality, and these have appeared in response to political initiatives by others:

- In Australia, the Labor party is more positive about promoting social change. Australia's current nation-wide reign of Labor governments, then, has offered a rare window of opportunity for proponents of same-sex law reform (cf. #074).
- In the Anglican setting, some North American Episcopalians (i.e. Anglicans, from the Diocese of New Hampshire) have 'risks all' by ordaining a homosexual bishop (Gene Robinson). Several years later, many Anglican bishops have avoided the usual worldwide gathering at Lambeth in London to meet separately in Jerusalem (cf. #072). On my local scene, Sydney journalist David Marr has written a lengthy piece in the Sydney Morning Herald's influential *Good Weekend*, which reflects negatively on Archbishop Peter Jensen's decision to go to Jerusalem instead of Lambeth.

But so what? Although our briefings haven't majored on homosexuality and have reacted to the initiatives of others, I could easily still be homophobic. Marr quotes a North American Episcopalian's analysis that at the root of the global Anglican crisis is 'the visceral fear' that homosexuality engenders. He believes that this fear drives conservative Anglican opposition to homosexuality, despite the claim that the matter is about biblical authority. Analogously then, a briefing such as this one may also evidence homophobia.

Those of us branded as 'homophobic' do not immediately recognise the charge. It is initially puzzling to us. Through an accident of history, the very socially conservative Moore College

community in which I live finds itself next to an avowedly gay community in Newtown. As my son and I walked down the street a few years ago, we saw two beautiful men dressed in silver, one as a silver fairy and the other with what could only be described as a silver loincloth. They made us giggle, which I think was the intended effect. They spoke kindly to us, and I felt no threat. We felt no reason to fear. There was nothing ‘visceral’ for us in the moment.

But it was obvious that these silver men lived very differently to us. The party invitation that they were handing out made that much clear! So on reflection, of course, it becomes clear that the term ‘homophobia’ was coined by analogy with ‘xenophobia’ (the irrational fear of strangers). Homophobia is used to denote a fear of homosexual difference, and the fear that such difference might damage society if expressed. In addition, homosexual people have every reason to suspect that such fear is driving the kind of anger that motivates the beatings that homosexuals do receive. It is quite reasonable, then, to suspect that fear lurks behind opposition.

However I want to suggest that the term is not really that helpful. Of course it does have handy *political* uses. I am accused of homophobia; I reply ‘but I am not!’ Therefore according to the well-known theorist in political rhetoric, George Lakoff, in that moment of reply *I lose the argument*. By resisting the label, I actually give the game away to my accuser. In the odd ways of modern political discourse, to resist a definition actually makes it stick all the harder. To protest that I am not-a-homophobe (or not-a-anything-else) somehow proves that really, I am. My accuser’s terms of engagement have won the day.

But in this briefing, I am not very interested in that game-play. I want to get at something much deeper and more important, and I want to get at it for the sake of people who often suffer terribly as gays. For I want to suggest that the term ‘homophobia’ masks and obscures the real situation.

This ‘real situation’ is that our community harbours two different kinds of opposition to homosexual people. I may be oversimplifying, but I would portray these different opponents as follows:

1. There truly are homosexual-haters. ‘Homophobic’ is not a strong enough description of these people. Just as there are misanthropes (people-haters) and misogynists (women haters), there are ‘mishomists’—an admittedly silly new word that cannot possibly catch on. But those who despise homosexuals enough to taunt, beat and kill them need a name of their own. I don’t know the extent to which these people are driven by fear; but the point at issue is that they certainly *hate*.
2. There are those who wish to accept homosexual people without agreeing with them on everything. They may be good at it, or very clumsy. They may be adept at it, or awkward. But the point is that they see themselves as having no reason to fear or despise homosexual people. They simply disagree with some of what they think and do; yet they want to find ways to accept and relate across that difference. Such a position has been called ‘critical tolerance’ (a stance that can apply to ‘disagreement within acceptance’ on any matter at all).

I class myself in the second group. I feel that to describe me as a ‘homophobe’ simply misses the mark. It does not engage with who I think I am. Of course, people who identify themselves as gay well understand what it is like for others not to engage with who they think they are. Indeed, a very great argument is to be had over whether I *can* ‘accept them without agreeing with them’, since for some people, to question homosexuality is also to reject *them*. To ‘accept them *necessarily*’ includes agreement with their gay self-identity and its reasons.

It is very hard to settle the complex matter of ‘identity’ here. But I offer the notion of ‘critical tolerance’ as possibly a ray of hope. For it grieves me to think of all that could go wrong, and has gone wrong, between homosexuals and people like myself. I want therefore to share now a discussion that is being had within our Christian community over the nature of our response to homosexual people.

The Social Issues Executive has been asked to suggest what might govern a Diocesan response to various new legal initiatives that concern same-sex couples. Here is a summary of what we have suggested. The suggestions are premised on the idea of ‘critical tolerance’. We begin with four ‘channel markers’ that do not answer every question, but which offer a path within which to evaluate legal proposals:

- 1. We support and encourage people to care for each other.** Christians do not oppose care and support between people! We support all changes to the law that promote and support relationships of care. Where relationship registers recognise such care, they are welcomed—and should include other caring relationships (e.g. for elderly siblings or for disabled family members etc.).
- 2. The needs of children take priority over the wants of adults.** When same-sex couples are main carers of children, we support them in that role (just as we support single parents). We do so without prejudice to the children concerned. We realise that our opposition to homosexual lifestyle should never take the form of challenging or compromising the security of children for whom these carers are the most significant adults they know.

[What about State arbitrated adoptions and fostering (e.g. of ‘wards of the state’)? Quite small numbers of children are involved in this question. In early 2006, we looked at the ‘evidence’ about whether children do better with mixed-sex parents over same-sex parents; but the matter is so shrill and politicised that everyone’s ‘evidence’ seemed to be heavily skewed by their presuppositions and ideology. Meanwhile, this interminable argument over whose evidence is ‘right’ was not helping children. So we reckon that in the meantime, States should take a ‘safe bet’ about what kids need. States must act for the best interests of each child, not for the ‘rights’ of applicants. We think that a stable, loving, harmonious married couple is the ‘safest bet’ for a child’s best interests, since having a mother and a father has so often just *worked* for so many people. (But ironically, this view also makes me grateful when gay carers take in disabled children that no one else, and no married couple, wants.)]

- 3. Marriage is not ‘reinventable’.** As the UK Christian ethicist Jonathon Chaplin puts it, the question of who may be ‘married’ ‘cannot be reduced to whether another extension of individual rights is merited in this case. Rather, participants in the debate must confront the question whether marriage, and family, have an enduring structural character that must be reckoned with before courts or legislators rush to judgement on the so-called “rights” question’. In other words, the lifelong, sexually exclusive, open-to-children thing that men and women keep doing will keep happening and will keep needing a name, whether or not we decide to reserve the term ‘marriage’ for it.
- 4. We seek a society that graciously allows cultural space for marriage.** In a study of the Bible’s account of family, we found that despite all the changes to family evident across 3000+ years of biblical history, and despite the very serious family problems that keep reappearing throughout, a constant was the valuable social role of a married couple to bear and raise children. We think the Bible is the word of God; but even if it is taken only an expression of ancient wisdom, it suggests that a society needs to do all it can to produce and keep a large proportion of families where stable, loving, harmonious married couples are open to bearing and raising children. (Of course a ‘good’ society must also accept, support and care for families that are not like that.)

We honour this activity by calling it ‘marriage’ and ‘family’ and by indulging it with some ‘positive discrimination’. Hence marriage ceremonies and registration should remain for the married. The daily realities of personal freedom for homosexual people would not be compromised by conceding this cultural space to marriage.

(None of this view should be taken as sidelining single people. In other contexts, I argue that single people have been badly ripped-off, and that the biblical authors honour their lives even if church culture and secular culture do not. Nor am I sidelining those married people who long for children but have not yet received any. Despite their sadness, such couples are deeply and truly married, and are also a ‘family’.)

These, then, were the four channel markers we suggested for evaluating new legal proposals. But I thought it was also very important to add three other points, for I think that these have been long overlooked in discussions among Christians:

- 5. Christians seek to love homosexuals meaningfully.** In a politicised environment where the stakes seem high, we can easily seem to despise homosexuals. But:
- We stand with them against the kinds of hatred and violence that is reported by their community.
 - As people who bear God's image, their networks of relationships—particularly where real care is given and received—deserve our respect.
 - We may need to find new ways to 'connect' with homosexuals, if Christ's loving offer of forgiven relationship is to be real and tangible for them.

We could ask God to lead us in his own love toward homosexuals in our community. We might ask God how to love in a way that touches their hearts while we follow Christ faithfully.

- 6. We call everyone to faithful marriage or chaste singleness.** We are *for* a vision of community life where sexual expression is not always necessary for contented lives together. Our sexual ethic is not intended to single out gay people, or divorced and remarried people, or people in defacto heterosexual relationships. We simply believe that faithful marriage and chaste singleness are the way we may find joy together. Our churches are an ongoing 'experiment' in living out these complementary styles of life together.

We need to address corrupted views of marriage, such as that it need not be lifelong, or that sexual exclusivity is only for those couples who choose it, or that openness to receiving children is an optional extra for the married. Such ethically 'voluntarist' views, where marriage is only what we choose it to be, have set the cultural conditions under which same-sex 'marriage' now seems reasonable and appropriate.

We also need to address the corrupted views of singleness which assume sexual expression to be central to a good human existence. Of course all are created to have sexual thoughts and feelings; but it does not follow that these must be expressed in order to live well.

(We have written other briefings about marriage and singleness. We will eventually post them to the web to make them more accessible.)

- 7. We ask the homosexual community for cultural and political detente.** We are two communities who will never agree. We are stuck with each other in Australian society. Each community battles for hearts and minds; each has its articles of faith; and we both have the capacity to hurt each other terribly. Neither community will disappear any time soon. The tensions we experience have to be addressed the way liberal democracies traditionally navigate profound disagreements of conscience: through free speech and freedom of assembly. By all means let us continue to try persuading each other, but at the same time, let us also seek to live well alongside each other in a civil society that we can all share, in 'critical tolerance', where we accept one another even while disagreeing.

I think there is a lot more to be talked about. For example,

- It seems to me that some Christians adopt a tone that suggests they hate gays. I think they should repent of that hatred. I think the Christian community needs to start challenging the bitter, angry, hostile modes of speech about homosexuals that do emanate from some Christian mouths (not just about homosexuals, by the way). But this repentance does not entail agreeing with everything that a homosexual person believes.

- It seems to me that some homosexuals are doing something very close to what religions do. They have a powerful set of beliefs about what it is to be truly human. They proselytise; they seek to win hearts and minds; and they work toward a world where everyone believes as they do about homosexuality. All of this is very similar to what I do about Jesus Christ. So it seems to me that our leaders need to hear some gay claims as ‘religious’ in nature, and therefore beyond the rightful domain of law and politics.
- It seems to me that both conservative Christians *and* the proponents of homosexual life are not always very thought out about the nature of human desire. Clearly, to live as a homosexual goes a bit deeper than to ‘make a choice’ as some Christians lazily like to put it (in strong agreement with the fourth-century heretic Pelagius). But also clearly, none of our desires are as immutable and hard-wired as we each like to imagine—gay people included. I am not implying ‘look you gay people—you can learn to be straight!’ Rather, I am saying that we all live together in a culture that is very shallow when it comes to talking and thinking about our desires and their expression. We could dig deeper. From where I sit, the Bible is far more helpful on the nature of our desire (and not just our sexual desires) than anyone has recently realised.

But these big issues deserve fuller exploration elsewhere. For the moment, I simply suggest that *we need to find new ways of talking and living together*. For many conservative Christians, it is wrong to be in a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender. For many homosexuals, it is wrong to question people doing so. For those who identify themselves as gay and Christian, the disagreement can cause pain and anger. For everyone else, it can be hard to know how to respond. This complex state of affairs will exist within our society for some time. We need to find new terms of debate if we are to live well together.

In this society, same-sex relationships are so politically charged that it has become easier to avoid discussing our disagreements. But conflict is not always bad. Done well, it reveals what really matters to each of us. We can be introduced to new ways of thinking and living that may surprise us at first, and may even delight us later. We can grow in the art of accepting each other, even while we disagree.

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Sources/Further Reading:

David Marr, ‘The Great Schism,’ *SMH Good Weekend* June 7 2008, pp. 24-26.

Online: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/the-archbishop-says-no/2008/06/10/1212863623804.html>.

Forum responses: <http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/forums/viewthread/3375/P60/#85260>

Archbishop Jensen, ‘Pray for unity,’ online:

http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/mediareleases/archbishop_jensen_pray_for_unity.

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