

## Same-Sex Marriage: Beyond Conservative and Liberal Fundamentalisms

September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018

The Christian Church always has before it, the challenge to think carefully about the times in which it lives, to read with imagination and insight the signs of the times. At times, Christians become caught up in either pushing back at social change in the name of tradition and orthodoxy, or embracing social change unquestioningly in the name of relevance. Same-sex marriage is one of those moments where Christians feel scandalized, enthusiastic or confused. Conservatives see same-sex marriage as *the* sign of secular victory over ‘the Christian’, while progressives, see it as a necessary recognition of rights, which Jesus would in all likelihood defend. The purpose of this short paper is to plea for a broader view of things, to move beyond a view that interprets same-sex marriage as a battle to the death between the secular and the Christian. Here, I attempt to explain the more nuanced relationship between Christian and secular thought, and the history that has made it so. In understanding this, we may be able to de-dogmatize the respective positions and give a better account of why we hold to a particular position, and why others hold to another. There is a saying that “the devil is in the detail”; well so is God.

Equality is a fundamental value that both modern secularism and Christianity share. Indeed, much of post-war history has been about the building of equitable societies. That said, history has a way of being unpredictable; it seldom unfolds as we expect. In the decades immediately following World War II, equality was construed largely through the lens of economics. This was understandable, since post-war reconstruction required such a priority. By the 1970s, the issue of equality began to move beyond the old economic paradigms – in fact equality was beginning to break down in economic affairs as de-regulation caught on – to those things non-economic, including equality between men and women, and still later, between heterosexuals and other groups, such as lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender people. This development has happened quite quickly, and has carried us to our current stage: the debate about same-sex marriage. In a sense, this is ‘crunch-time’: crunch time for the LGBTIQ communities and beyond, who see same-sex marriage as the litmus test of how serious society is about equality; and crunch time for others, including many Christians, who sit uncomfortably with the idea, taking the view, that marriage is biblically and naturally an exclusively hetero-sexual affair.

### The ‘Debate’: A Squandered Opportunity

The ‘discussion’ that took place in 2017, prior to the postal survey of September 12<sup>th</sup> to November 7<sup>th</sup>, leading to the Marriage Amendment Bill becoming law on December 9<sup>th</sup> of the same year, was disappointing. If Christians have found it difficult to dialogue with each other, so has the secular world. The “Yes” case focused upon objectifying those who may vote “no”, as bigots, with the message, “Are you one”? The “No” case, focused its attention upon two issues: first, pushing back against this bigotry image, through promoting itself as mainstream, with young middle-class moms, voicing their fears; and second, focusing less on the essence of the “Yes” arguments and more upon the unknown potential consequences of same sex marriage; consequences that we were told, *we* should fear. These ‘potential’ consequences included, the likelihood of gender-confusion among children, the denial of parent’s freedom to resist this (<https://www.qt.com.au/videos/backlash-against-vote-no-campaign-ad/52610>), and the possible loss of religious freedom, where the church will be told what to think and what to do.

### Several Churches’ Statements

For their part, the Christian churches have provided a varied response. The Catholic Church has reiterated its opposition to same-sex marriage, acknowledging that it accepts that same-sex relationships do and should function under alternative legal frameworks, other than marriage. The Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church, has financially contributed to the “No” campaign, arguing that “God gave marriage to men and women, for their own good, for the good of children and for the good of society”. The Hillsong Church – of conservative Pentecostal roots – has been perhaps the most surprising, in that it has assumed a moderate view, urging its faithful to vote, but relenting from saying what that vote should be. Hillsong avoids buying into the issue directly, as long as religious freedom is preserved. Quite possibly, Hillsong’s caution, has to do with its young demographic. The Uniting Church is prudent, affirming two principles: marriage as “the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God, of a man and a woman to live together for life”, and the Church’s commitment to being an inclusive community that “embraces LGBTIQ people as full members”. It indicates that “we will consider carefully the implications of any future changes to the Marriage Act”, but independently “continue our own process of discernment, in relation to same-gender marriage, in a way that reflects the Uniting Church’s commitment to uphold Christian values and principles”. The Uniting Church has not directed its members to vote one way or the other.

## **The Challenge: Torn between Doctrine and Ethics**

The great challenge for Christian people in this discussion has been this: many have been torn, between, on the one hand, the historically accepted doctrinal position of the church, which holds to marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman; and on the other, a general sense of fairness in society, the principles of equality and inclusivity in a modern secular democracy, where the rule of law posits the principle of equal access to the law. This conundrum is reflected in a couple's struggle to decide how to vote. She and her husband – practicing Catholics – were of the view to vote “yes”, on the basis of a general sense of fairness for all, but at the Sunday mass, were instructed by the priest to do the opposite. They consequently voted “no”, but remained worried and unconvinced. In a world where faith and secularism have walked pretty much hand-in-hand for centuries, where we have learnt to negotiate the journey of separation of church and state, and all that this entails, including a certain reciprocity between the two, it seems that we have hit a wall. This time, one must declare oneself religious *or* secular, Christian *or* ‘humanist’.

But it is precisely this specious bifurcation that is unhelpful, for two reasons. First, we all live in the *same* reality, whether we are Christian or otherwise. Christian marriage sits within a broader framework of civil marriage. We are all ‘glued at the hip, whether we acknowledge it or not. Second, not only Christians, but Christianity and the Christian church itself, are on both sides of the debate, and legitimately so, given Christianity's relationship to secularism. Let's look at both these questions: the breadth of marriage and the Christian roots and inspiration of the secular.

### ***Marriage: A Mish-Mash of Christian and Civil, Civil and Christian, even before the Rise of Secularism***

We tend to think that Christian history has been all of one piece, uniform in its theology of marriage; but it has not. The doctrinal position of heterosexual marriage as *the* appropriate sexual pattern, has existed for some centuries, but not always. Singleness, especially celibacy, was prized *above* marriage from the birth of the church until the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Martin Luther soon put paid to that. He married the former nun, Katharina von Bora, with whom he set up house in a former monastery, the *Black Cloister* – a wedding present from a local politician – proceeding to parent, squillions of children... well nearly...six. Prior to this ‘Lutheran moment’, which changed for ever, the Christian approach to marriage in the west, sex, any sex, had been considered a mere concession to the fallen human condition, and marriage, a statement of weakness. Moreover, heterosexual marriage was not celebrated by the Christian wedding service until about the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, that marriage became a sacrament in Western theology and not until the 24<sup>th</sup> session of the Council of Trent in 1563, that it was actually declared a sacrament. So, for 1500 years of church history, marriage operated largely according to societal, rather than theological norms. In other words, there have been a range of doctrinal attitudes to marriage through the centuries, with civil marriage predating the Christian version, and even continuing to parallel it. In short, marriage has always been as much a civil affair as a Christian one. It has been broader than the Christian church.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Christianity: Mother of Secular Humanism***

Seldom understood, is that secular humanism is the child of Christianity, in particular Protestant Christianity. While secularism has rejected religion in the name of “rationalism”, its moral assumptions derive directly from Christian moral theology. The key to this lies with deism, the heyday of which, was between 1680 to 1790. It was a movement that believed in a rational God, and that identified with the Protestant rejection of religious superstition and empty ritual. Its thinkers were above all, Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, Francois-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Emmanuel Kant, who together, effectively established the creed of the modern West. Among these, Locke, stands out. The author of *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695), it was he, who advocated the principle of toleration – arguably, the single most important ingredient of liberal political thought, inseparable from secular humanism. Since then, secular humanism has continued to be shaped by its Christian foundation: in the mid-twentieth century, the concept of universal human rights was launched by mostly Christian thinkers, and the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the US, was the brain-child of Christianity, represented in Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy. This is not to say that secularist thinking is the same as Christianity. There is a *thinness* to secular humanism, a limitedness, that does not offer people meaning or have the same power as Christianity, to inspire or sustain. But to reject it is a mistake. We are not enemies.

So, what may we conclude? First, marriage is broader than the Church, and always has been: even before the rise of the secular. This we modestly need to keep in mind. Second, institutionally, the Church sits uneasily with a concept of marriage that challenges its doctrinal position, but counter-intuitively, the very secularist humanism that promotes

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas accepts this breadth of marriage in his discussion in the *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., q. 42, a. 3. He argues for the sacramental nature of marriage, “in so far as it represents the mystery of Christ's union with the Church.” But he continues, that “[as to] other advantages...such as the friendship and mutual services which husband and wife render one another, its institution “*belongs to the civil law*”

marriage equality, does so in the light of the Christian ethics and values, it has adopted and interpreted. If you are of the conviction that marriage, should be exclusively between a man and a woman; that is consistent with current *Christian doctrine*, and a legitimate decision. If you hold to the view that marriage should be broader in definition, because of your commitment to Christian teaching, regarding the rights of minorities, reflected in the principles of toleration and inclusion; that is consistent with *Christian ethics*, and a legitimate decision.

Life is complicated, history is complex, throwing up conundrums, which can seldom be answered by simply repeating what we already think we know. We need to understand ourselves not just dogmatically, but historically, trying to discern the bigger picture, always aware that in the real world, we often have to opt for the least unsatisfactory response, as we struggle together in the dark.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The reformer, Martin Luther, understood the way in which Christian theology, like everything else is only ever partial. He pointed out that total faith and total theology are impossible, because we are only human. Struggling to believe amid conflicting realities does not mean one is failing, but rather that one is Christian.