

## God's children, straight and gay

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What has made the recent debate on the proposed repeal of clause 28 so extraordinary is that it is hard to envisage it taking place in any other European country. The Anglo-Saxon mind apparently encounters peculiar difficulties in coming to terms with the human condition, especially in matters of sexuality.

Many of the debate's protagonists have drawn on what they believe to be a reservoir of Christian concern for ethics and education. I suggest that this belief, held by many who think of themselves as good, practising Christians, could hardly be further from the truth. The arguments set forth by these would-be defenders of the faith have little, if anything, to do with a viable form of ethics or education, and nothing to do with Christianity.

What they do tell of is a profound, one might almost say pathological, nostalgia for a tribal, or feudal, past, whose values for a society such as our own are utterly redundant. The fallacy underlying this essentially anti-Christian creed is that whatever is best and most virtuous must have been set down long ago, either in scripture or by tradition - but certainly in stone.

Here a distinction has to be made; there is a world of difference between tradition and traditionalism. In Christianity, tradition - under the guidance of the Holy Spirit - is ongoing and contingent upon man's capacity to understand. Hence, Jesus's words of warning: "Many things I could tell you, but you would not understand," however, "I shall be with you always... and my Spirit will guide you into all truth." That truth, significantly present in Christ, will - if we listen and respond - "make us free".

Traditionalism, on the other hand, is a refusal to accept that deal and, despite voluble claims to gospel fidelity, a refusal to take the warnings of Christ seriously. Hence, what was once "understood" - and, according to Christ, not fully understood - is regarded as final.

What limited the understanding of even Jesus's closest friends was, of course, their conditioning. Racially and self-consciously they were rooted in the salvation story of a small semitic tribe. Traditionalist morality is rooted in that same tribal mentality, and thus belongs to a time when the nation of Israel was struggling for survival in a hostile desert environment.

Resources were scarce and had to be secured by force. Hence, numbers were all important, in particular the number of young males. The tribe had to maintain a strong fighting force, and its central ethic was geared to that end. Procreation, being a sociopolitical imperative, received the highest sanction - that of Jehovah, Lord of Hosts.

The need and justification for such a specific ethic has long disappeared. Our lives could hardly be further removed from those of our Old Testament forebears, and it is simply foolish to imagine that we can be guided by the same norms to which they clung.

If we are to mature, as the spiritual life demands, we must recognise that what Christ "told" his hearers, and a fortiori the legal and ethical considerations of ancient Israel, was provisional, contingent upon the historical, psychological and intellectual limitations of his hearers. Christ did not destroy the Law, but did try to transform and, where possible, supersede it, for he knew that the fathers of Israel did what they did because they had to. To be faithful to Christ, we must do likewise.

Those who find this conflicts with their scriptural understanding might reflect that, according to scripture, the Law delivered to Moses was itself conditional. It was a concession to the incomprehension of the children of Israel. God's original dispensation, we are told, was smashed to pieces by an enraged Moses.

The implications of this are that we must accept, as Christ himself accepted, our humanity - and this entails, as in the gospel, a commitment to men and women whose humanity is rich, diverse and, yes, sometimes downright annoying.

We know that between four and 10% of humanity is fundamentally homoerotic. Equally, we know that this tendency is natural, ie whatever its etiology, it is not a consequence of nurture, persuasion or promotion. As Christians, we must therefore conclude that homosexuality - given its prevalence and endurance - is an essential aspect of the imago dei .

Consequently, it has not merely to be accepted, tolerated or respected but caringly tutored - so that gay men and women can grow, and help others to grow, into "the fullness of the stature of Christ". Within a Christian understanding, such education is the right of every child, whatever its sexual orientation.

To those who advocate "an acceptance of the homosexual, but not his or her homosexuality", one can only commend the words of Christ, as reported in the Gospel of Thomas: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not... what is within [will] kill you."

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