

Love is for All – so too Respect

A perspective on Hate

When I first came to reflect on this issue as a Christian believer, had the prospect of same sex marriage not become a serious issue in Australian politics, it would have remained of very little concern. Had GLBTI's not started to speak out on their own behalf over recent decades I would not have thought the way I do now, but a compassionate and open minded person cannot hear such things and not be moved in some way.

When I was in high school during the 1980's there were three male teachers I thought at the time were same-sex attracted. Two of them were genuinely nice people you could get along with very easily. The other was very staid and proper, and was a devotee of a faith with Indian roots which I understand requires total abstinence from intimacy. He made no attempt to mask his giveaway mannerisms and vocal inflections, which was very brave back in those days. He stood out and was a point of discomfort for all, and yet did not seem in the least bit worried. I will always admire that. By age 16 I had been involved in an evangelical church for about two years, and after edging closer to the Christian faith all that time, I made a personal, private commitment to Christ. That was late in 1984 and I've never looked back. During the next year I would talk rabidly about my faith (and other issues I somehow figured were related). Any classmate failing to notice had to have been living under a rock.

As far back as I can remember even just understanding what same-sex attraction actually is, I always felt that making GLBTI's lives miserable just for being what they are was misguided and wrong. There were always folks whose putative righteous indignation went too far, as if spraying a bit of vitriol on those who had done them no wrong somehow purged them of their own impurity. I wondered how people who have no control over being what they are can be held to be doing something wrong just in being who they are. This was when same sex attraction was still unacceptable in even radical counter-culture circles. No-one dared suggest that there was something in same-sex attraction equivalent to heterosexuality.

I recall clearly that for adults, a person's sexuality was strictly their own business. A man could spend his life single and unattached without questions being raised behind his back, and two single women could be intimate life-long friends likewise. For adults you didn't need to prove your normality. Now it's exactly the opposite. But in high school, transgender people were deemed

by peers to be perverts; bisexuality was not even nearly understood. That was at school. I did on rare occasions hear somebody from church circles say something derogatory about homosexuality. That was rare, and it was muted in tone, and I truly mean that. In church circles you could always expect a more gentle response, even if it was going to involve a book, chapter and verse. A lot of people assume that Christian morality is the primary source of this unpleasantness and when some fringe whackos spit some venom it's everyone from the Pope downward standing behind them. While there are people in and near to every religion, who misuse its teachings to lend authority to their bigotry and hypocrisy, from the bottom of my heart I disagree.

If you want to understand a religion you need to understand the culture you find it in because people always bring their culture with them into their religious activities, and how the convincing majority of strong adherents differ from those who have not been improved and uplifted by it. Every little movement in history that became a religion did so because it solved problems and gave helpful answers to questions for vast numbers of people over a very long time. We have heard a lot lately about Christian leaders who have practiced paedophilia and who have protected those accused of it. Does this mean that Christianity as a whole is the source of paedophilia? If it was of the essence of Christianity to encourage and protect wrongdoing it would have helped no-one in its early roots and would have died the death of many horrid little cults. We have heard about Christians and people ostensibly with church connections behaving very badly toward GLBTI's; ostracising them, bullying them, disowning them, exposing their secrets and saying hurtful things. Does this mean that Christianity itself is responsible for this? That is a different question from the previous one. There are just a few places where same-sex attraction is mentioned in the Bible. Those are very brief and while they are straight to the point, there is no hellfire ranting. The text just says something and moves on. The real sexual vice in the Bible is adultery, then fornication follows as a distant second. All other sexual issues are very seldom mentioned. The Old Testament prescribes the death penalty for a range of sexual sins, but then Jesus did away with it in the New Testament. This is how a sensible Theologian should gauge the mind of God on a matter. I wish so much that medieval Christians had a proper sense of the value of literacy, analysis and clear thinking like we do now, as a lot of mistakes and regrettable abuses would have been avoided.

If you study a bit of anthropology and social history you find all throughout human experience, except in the last few decades, the rules of sexual conduct have been strict and savagely enforced. It is common across almost all cultures we know of that if a person is found to behave abnormally or fraudulently in

their sexuality they're sent off to a dreadful fate. When anthropologists see common elements across totally different cultures, it's common to draw a conclusion about basic human nature. There is nothing harsh about the Bible compared with the common standards of most traditional cultures, or possibly the attitudes of those who first received these writings. It gets straight to the point but is really plain and terse. Venomous reactions to sexual irregularities then are a very human phenomenon, and definitely not solely one of organised religion.

We all know the meaning implied by the words 'Sodomite' and 'Sodomy'. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is misrepresented as judgment on male homosexuality, but not one homosexual appears, rather a group of dangerous perverts who raped and murdered a pair of girls one night, after being denied a pair of men. It's therefore about a society where people had no sexual restraint per se. I have no idea why so many people think this story is about gays. Instead it tells us that God occasionally draws the line; yet we know from many more parts of the Bible that this line is very rarely and very reluctantly drawn. In fact, Nineveh, another deeply sinful city, was sent a prophet whose preaching led to their mass repentance and avoidance of destruction.

If Christianity is guilty for all the dysfunction that has come with the moral dignity of some people, it is because earlier European Christians lacked the subtlety and scholarly insight to synthesise different parts of the Bible into sensible doctrines that do not conflict with other parts of the Bible. The hypocritical and pathological hatred for particular sins that some perceive can only be based on lopsided reading and low standards of reasoning. It is unfortunate that these errors have continued as if believing and repeating them is an entrenched ritual. Fortunately this has been changing during the last few decades.

Christians of all persuasions who actually study what the Bible says with intent and realism, realise that Jesus' teachings and examples were based on fundamental principles rather than tradition or ritual commandments. Jesus was all about forgiving sins, accepting those who are genuinely penitent, ignoring the seriousness of what they are penitent of, being honest with God and with others. There is a well known passage in John chapter eight where Jesus was confronted by religious leaders with a woman, whom they somehow (the mind wonders) found in an act of adultery. They wanted to put Jesus to the test. Jesus was probably expected to follow the Old Testament rules and order her execution, or perhaps, to compromise the written code because of his teachings on forgiveness. At face value the situation should have left Jesus at an impasse. It was Jesus who taught that that forgiving a wrong is better

than taking an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or (it follows) a life for a life. Jesus' response was sheer genius, for he did neither. He said the first stone should be cast by he who was without sin, and we see that the religious leaders left the scene one by one. He was referring perhaps to sins specific to the situation, not to sin in general. Perhaps the sins he was talking about were those of maliciously plotting and stalking the woman, invading a private home, abducting her, and letting go the adulterer who had to have been there for their testimony to have any validity beyond a murderous conspiracy. Of course we will never know this for sure.

Jesus then told the woman that he did not accuse her. He was not saying that adultery was not after all a sin. He did not ask her whether the accusation was true, but let her go without charge. Imagine being caught in a very private and disreputable act and faced with the consequences publically. The shock of discovery and fear of consequences can create a deep inner will to reform. Read the passage between the lines and you start to see a woman deeply sorry. If she was not penitent she would have run off to resume minding her own business once her accusers were gone. Staying there exposed her to further embarrassment and verbal condemnation. Jesus, we assume, was honouring her penitence. Instead of punishing or rebuking her, he absolved her of guilt.

To disapprove of a thing, whether religiously or not, you don't have to hate the people who do it, or to be morally elitist, or anything of the sort. You only need to understand it. You can care deeply about drug addicts and still be against drug abuse. There are Christian ministries aimed at reaching out to prostitutes, drug addicts, and yes, GLBTI's, and they do this compassionately, not because they are trying to cleanse the streets and purify all they see before them. It's simply because they want to share the spiritual and emotional benefits that they enjoy with those in the greatest need. Those who are rejected and feel their deepest emotional and spiritual needs can never be met. If a person regrets what they have done and asks for forgiveness, trusting that God will forgive them, then from that moment their sin is no longer accounted, exactly as if it never even happened in the first place. The humanistic preference is to undermine moral laws to suit the alleged transgressor so that they can feel better being as they are. The Christian approach means that people reform themselves and live better lives with a clear conscience.

None of this makes any sense of the fact that some have been ejected from churches for sexual and gender distinctions, as well as other issues. I honestly think that this happens because most people, especially those who live comfortable bourgeois lives, simply fail to understand and react badly. Their church no longer feels comfortable and restful. Sundays cease to be so

enjoyable for them and they do not stop to think what the church really exists for and what their hypocrisy costs the few. But I really can say truthfully that the vast majority of the decidedly hateful sentiments I've encountered over many years have come from people outside Christianity, who have little or no regard for the teachings of Jesus. Such people can be narrow-minded and thoughtless, until confronted with the pain they cause others. Some folks need to acquaint themselves with the fact that humans will seek love in intimate relationships, and the fact that some of these do not conform to standard practices cannot be changed by expressing disgust or rejecting people. Even the Bible says this, in James 1:20, '...human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.'

In the mid 1990's I moved into a little flat. It was the rear-most of five, on the corner of an alley, where I lived for roughly six years. Quickly I found to my amazement that one of my neighbours was a certain high school teacher, staid and proper, a devotee of another faith. He was only a little greyer. When first we made eye contact he gaped from down the driveway as if the police were coming. He was quickly back indoors. For the next week or so every time I saw him he was acting macho as if, by some miracle, I had never noticed his normal mannerisms. I felt it was important to set his mind at rest, so, when something came up shortly I took the opportunity to go to his front door. I knocked and there he stood with a look of apprehension as if I was about to launch into some nasty sermon about some form of hellfire. I said hello and then in my most authentic casual manner got straight down to business. I think I then said something innocuous about the high school, and that was it. Quickly the middle-aged pedagogue smiled and relaxed and he seemed to realise that in spite of my monotheistic fervour I was okay with him. We bid each other farewell. Everything was amicable from then on for the next five years until he moved away.

From 2006 to 2016 I was in a job which involves detailed investigations into insurance claims. Most of them were work injuries which involved me visiting and conducting inquiries at workplaces of all kinds. A job like that is a fantastic opportunity to learn about industry cultures, management techniques and how workplace relationships operate. I found the number one problem in workplaces is a lack of communication and understanding between people when there is either limited contact or inequality of power. We always assume things about those we do not fully understand, and those assumptions are so often negative. When something goes wrong we assume the person at fault is a cynic, a bully, lacks moral compunction, or worse still is plotting our downfall. I would regularly hear exactly those things from parties to matters under investigation, and then receiving the independent facts from witnesses,

as well as plausible, validated excuses from the accused. I would eventually find that in many cases a personality clash or a lack of communication was the one likely explanation. If we all tried to understand the people we don't understand, think about their rationale and needs, and respected people simply for their humanity, then most conflict in the social world would cease within a few days. I mean this literally. Even in the case of the GLBTI lifestyle versus religious objectors, if we all tried to find what we can respect in those we disagree with, the people on both sides could come to terms with each other and get along much better.

On both sides of this issue, the hated don't have the right to hate back – which is different from self defence – and the haters have nothing to gain from showing hatred. Those whose sentiments are misrepresented do not have the right to fight back in kind, or anything to gain from that. A lie in answer to a lie is a desperate and provocative measure. And neither do those who, by merit of their power or social prestige, are in a position to punch well above their weight, have the right to use that position to undermine the truth and the logic of the matter. A campaign of lies and hyperbole is dirty fighting, just as it is an egregious error to go along with the perpetuation of ancient mistakes. Given how sore this issue is, what we all need to do is to be as honest, as genuine, as rational, and as respectful as possible because future generations rely on us to move forward with the common good in mind.