

Q&A: 'Ministers: we accept equality'. What are your thoughts?

Clara asks (on my facebook wall): *I read an interesting article today titled, 'Ministers take aim at religious extremists: we accept equality'. Wondered your thoughts on this issue.*



The article that Clara refers to is this: <http://www.news.com.au/national-news/federal-election/ministers-take-aim-at-religious-extremists-we-accept-equality/story-fnho52ip-1226676430143>

The signatories to the letter referred to in the article can be found here: <http://www.australianmarriageequality.com/wp/2012/04/04/42-multi-faith-clergy-call-for-marriage-equality/>

The letter is actually quite old (April 2012). The fact that it is being raised in July 2013 as a rhetorical riposte to ACL attacks on Kevin Rudd is symptomatic of how these things get used as political footballs: "Christians talking against gay marriage? Well, here's our Christians talking about gay marriage and they support us!" There's nothing particularly wrong with that, that's one of the reasons the letter was written in the first place I'm sure.

So what are my thoughts? Nothing profound really.

This not a surprise. The signatories to the letter are mostly your left-leaning Anglicans and Unitings with the odd Baptist and so forth. Nothing unexpected. We could talk about how representative these leaders are of the Christian populace and the fact that they generally belong to the parts of the church

that are in decline, but whatever, that isn't the point.

For me the two interesting things are this:

1) Firstly: Christians must demonstrate that their views are Christian.

I'm not saying that these leaders aren't Christian. What I am saying is that it is not enough to say "I'm a Christian and I support SSM." They need to articulate and demonstrate the connections between the Christian philosophy and the SSM agenda and why they are congruous and supportive of one another. This is how you give your support substance and weight.

It is particularly so when you have signatories from a wide range of faith positions (including non-Christian) – what philosophical ground, that is common and not antagonistic to the positions held, is being used to espouse the opinion?

Without that it's not much more than a rather small petition.

From what I can see of the text of the letter (not easily accessible as far as I can see, even through the AME website) this hasn't been done. The two texts I do have are this excerpt:

"As clergy from various different faiths and denominations in Australia, we believe marriage is a fundamental institution in our society. It fosters greater commitment between partners, provides children with a sense of security and stability, and strengthens ties with families and communities. Marriage is a blessing to be shared, so we encourage people of faith who support marriage equality to voice their support for the reform by responding to the House of Representatives inquiry on same-sex marriage today."

This isn't much more than the "marriage is a blessing" and

“blessing should be shared” argument. Which says nothing at all really. None of us will disagree on the blessing of marriage. What we do disagree on is the characteristics of marriage which inform and construct and advance that blessing.

Rowland Croucher (say it ain’t so Rowland!) is the other text which does inform this a bit:

“How can I, a heterosexual who’s been very happily married for 50 years, tell anyone else they don’t have the right to form a loving, committed, lifelong union and enjoy the fruits of marriage as I have done?” wrote Reverend Dr Rowland Croucher, from John Mark Ministries, Victoria. “Marriage is not a club to be restricted to some. Like the Gospel, it is a blessing to be shared.”

And at least he gives some reasoning, albeit thin. Here Dr. Croucher connects “marriage” to the inclusivity of the gospel. Which has some merit, because the gospel *is* inclusive.

(The “how can I tell anyone else line” is rhetorical fluff because it doesn’t speak to the core issue of what marriage *actually is*, just to the fact that whatever it is it cannot be *arbitrarily* restricted – we all agree with that.)

Now this is all great, but as Christian leaders, these people need to present a clear and coherent connection between a Christian framework and their position. I won’t reiterate all that here, but the sorts of questions that go unanswered by Croucher et al. include clear rebuttals “OK, Rowland, but the Gospel is also exclusive (Christ alone) and calls for a surrender of one’s whole life (including sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual), how do you coincide these Christian truths with your statement about marriage?” And also fundamental questions of epistemology, Scriptural affirmations of the connection of marriage with the created order and so on.

In other words (and this speaks to why marriage is so contentious), our understanding of marriage derives from the full sweep of Christian philosophy. If you're going to talk about this you need to demonstrate coherence across the whole. These signatories haven't done this.

2) Secondly: "Christian" is not a badge. It's used that way by revisionists all the time who think in terms of "attributes" and "minorities."

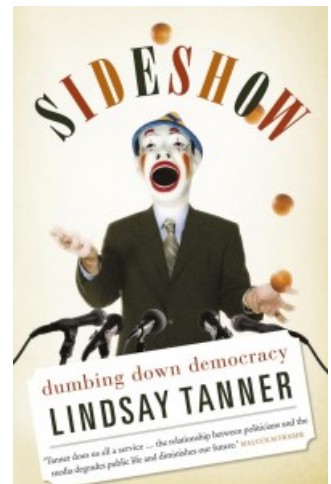
Religion has become an "attribute" of a person, not a voluntary and adopted wholistic framework for life. Therefore if you can demonstrate that one "Christian" agrees with you, you can assert that there is no reason why someone else wearing that badge shouldn't also.

This is an insipid and patronising understanding of how religion and worldviews work. The badges don't matter, it's the substance that counts. The people that don't support SSM have good reasons for not doing so. It's not enough to throw their badge back at them, you actually have to deal with their reasonings and demonstrate their unreasonableness.

To conclude. What are my thoughts? Nothing unexpected, just another demonstration of the insipidness that tends to dominate this debate.

Review: Sideshow – Dumbing Down Democracy

I've been looking forward to reading former Federal Finance Minister, Lindsay Tanner's *Sideshow*. Tanner always came across as a thoughtful politician when he was in public office – it was clear his book was going to be no Lathemesque tell-all whinge but a critique of our governance in our society from a unique perspective.



But it isn't a groundbreaking revelation of the whys and woes of Australian politics. Tanner gives a thorough commentary – particular with regard to the events surrounding the 2010 federal election – but often he is simply shedding light on the bleeding obvious: our politics has become driven by spin, show-horses get more power than work-horses, and ideas and thoughtful governance are being forced to give way to the charade of “look like you're doing something and don't offend anyone important” (crf. p15).

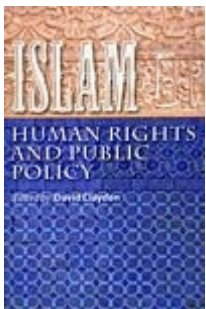
Much of this book explores the codependent interplay between journalists and politicians. “Calm makes for terrible telly” – Tanner quotes Michael Roux on page 58 – and so politicians are forced to create drama and manhandle debate into narratives that excite but don't invite a consideration of social value.

There was a modicum of challenge for me: I was one of those who bemoaned the “Kath & Kim” nature of the last Federal election campaign which seemed ruled by focus groups made up of the disengaged. My opinion firmed up – let's get rid of compulsory voting – let the engaged people vote, and the disengaged exercise their abstention by default. Tanner himself muses on the possibility (p208). The challenge is in the recognition that I am, perhaps, one of the “cultural elites” with “waning power... to enforce notions of respectability and community values across our society.”

(p180). I hope not. I long not for enforcement but for engagement, yet we are caught in a spinning spiral of cynicism and childish, formulaic, leadership-by-the-numbers.

The book is a good read. It will continue to form some of the political engagement I have the opportunity to participate in these days. My one frustration was that Tanner does not leave us with a solution. I think perhaps it will take a crisis and a miracle to restore our national political integrity, let us pray they go together.

Review: Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy



I was handed a copy of *Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy* by my Bishop, John Harrower, who is one of the contributors to this book. I came to the book as one who is aware only in general terms of the values of Islam and the application of Islamic religion and spirituality in the public sphere. This book informs, clarifies, warns, exhorts.

The book is far from some Christian compendium of anti-Muslim tracts. The contributors are respected, studious, academic, serious leaders. None of them promulgate a phobic line that is sometimes used elsewhere; there is no emotive placing of Christianity as a victim in a crusade-like framework where the Kingdom of God is threatened by hordes of heathen. Rather here is genuine concern about society in general, not just the Christian church. It is an apology for pluralism – but pluralism done well, in freedom.

Peter Day catches the program somewhat in his chapter,

Australian Public Policy: Examining the Foundations:

"It should be clear that excessive Islamophobia is a poor foundation for the development of public policy in any field. And it is an especially poor foundation for the development of the sound knowledge bases... on which sound policy ultimately depends." (page 27)

This book gave me new awareness of aspects of Islam. An example of this is *dhimmitude* – the tolerance of non-Muslims allowed to live (as *dhimmi*) in subjugation to Muslims. Mark Durie applies it by considering the tendency of Western tolerance to unquestioningly affirm all spiritualities.

"This is not a healthy way to engage with Islam for those living in liberal democracies. It establishes a framework in which Islam takes on the role of a dominator that expects to be praised and admired. The reaction to deserved criticism, when it manages to find a voice, can be shock, denial and outrage." (page 34)

The exposition of the subtleties of *sharia* law were also worthwhile. The apostasy laws, preventing a Muslim from converting to another religion on pain of severe punishment including death are often cited (amongst other things) as an indicator of the "fundamental areas of conflict between Islamic law and Western democratic human rights" (page 66).

A common conclusion was that even partial recognition of *sharia* within secular society is unhelpful. Abdallah Bahri shows in his chapter on *Aspects of Sharia Introduced into Non-Islamic States* how concepts of religious freedom and human rights are being undermined because the end-game of *Sharia* is always towards a "complete way of life."

"Many Muslim leaders teach that humanly determined laws are not God's laws and therefore do not need to be obeyed." (Page

"It is this complete way of life that is embodied in the Sharia. It prescribes everything from the personal and the family to the state level." (page 185)

And finally the concept of *da'wa*, or "invitation", which is often portrayed as the "real" face of Islam as opposed to *jihad* – persuasion or invitation instead of coercion or force. Paul Stenhouse argues that *da'wa* is "Jihad with a Velvet Glove" and warns about being

"deceived, as many in the West are deceived, into thinking that abandonment of overt violence means abandonment of the goals of violence... a change of policy, not a change of heart... Through da'wa it hopes to achieve by stealth what will ultimately prove to be unattainable by brute force." (pages 222, 224)

Bishop John's chapter, *Religious Policy, Multi-Faith Dialogue, and Australian Values* looks at the difficulties of the engagement with Islam in "multi-faith" conversations. He notes that the tendency of Government to "promote multi-faith dialogue as a means of developing a spirit of harmony" rests on certain assumptions, and

"Where one or more of these assumptions are not agreed to by the proposed participants, the resultant 'dialogue' becomes an opportunity for advocacy of one's own world view and the dialogue makes no contribution towards a spirit of harmony... Experience in interfaith dialogue has shown to date that the attempt to develop harmony through dialogue is an idealist's hope that is not often realised." (page 247)

This is a worthy recognition of the tendency in Western society to insist that religion submit to a pseudo "civic religion" empty of all diversity or proclamation. Bishop John

puts forward a better framework.

“Public policy on promoting harmony should be pursued in the context of promoting the nation’s values, rather than requesting discussions between religious groups... The religious context carries with it, inevitably, an agenda for advocacy and the need to protect one’s doctrinal position. What can be encouraged, however, is a secular dialogue on values.” (pages 251-252)

This book isn’t a wrestle or a debate. The issues are *handled* but not *grappled* with in the sense that there is very little to-and-fro, exhortation, rebuttal, response. It is primarily educated opinion and observation.

Therefore, the value is for us who have not had the opportunity or the insight to observe these things about Islam or consider them in that way. The things noted are real, relevant and will become increasingly so in the future as worlds collide. It motivates myself, for one, to be further applied to the teaching of Biblical truth that it may find many voices in times ahead.