

# Acceptable Christians

In the lead up to consideration of changes to Tasmanian and Federal anti-discrimination laws, gay activist Rodney Croome has recently penned this interesting piece which I found at Tasmanian Times.



I find it interesting, not so much because of the content of the article, but because Rodney is employing a rhetorical technique that is becoming a standard method of obfuscating the role of religious thought in public debate. The technique is to conclude that a person's application of their religious framework is invalid by asserting that the application is wrong or unnecessary on what looks like (but isn't) the person's own terms. It's a form of ad hominem and an attempt to impose inconsistency onto the person's position.

It looks like this (to use a person with a Christian framework as an example):

1. Other Christians disagree with you on Issue X, therefore your view on Issue X is invalid.
2. Christ never said anything about Issue Y, therefore your view on Issue Y is invalid.

The rhetoric is not entirely invalid, as long as you are willing to own the assumptions and the implications which lie behind it:

1. Religious belief is a personal characteristic, not a reasonable and philosophical framework for discussing matters of public importance.
2. The fact that other people with a religious characteristic have a different view on the Issue means that you can join them without undermining your

characteristic, the characteristic itself being, of course, irrelevant to the argument.

3. What I have to say about your religious framework is more authoritative than what you have to say about it.
4. There are two forms of religion – the “acceptable” and the “non-acceptable.”
5. ...

Which is all rather patronising really. For sure, it’s wrong to play the religious belief as a trump card (“I believe it religiously therefore you can’t disagree with me!”). But the role of religion, and other philosophies of life, is to inform the values and reasons of human beings that are entirely valid to public debate. The way to interact with a religious person is to deal with the substance of the argument. For instance, the validity of a “sanctity of life” argument should deal with issues of what is life and how we value it, balance it against other values and so forth – not the fact that that argument can be derived from a religious framework (as well as many others).

And I’ve got no problem with being told that I am being inconsistent with my beliefs. After all I have bound myself to follow Jesus – if someone would like to pull me up on the (many) places I fall down on that, that’s fine. But it has to be done genuinely – with exegetical and intellectual rigour, demonstrating a true engagement with the framework to which I am bound. Building a straw man out of a bunch of pop-theological references and telling me I should follow that is not going to cut it, and it is somewhat insulting to think it should.

Let me play Rodney’s rhetoric back at him, in a fit of deliberate sarcasm and irony: Rodney has a lot of good things to say, but really he should be just like those nice gay people that don’t get agitated about things. After all if they can be content, why can’t he?

Seriously, Rodney Croome has in the past produced some very thoughtful pieces which have genuinely challenged me, and so my disappointment is real. And he isn't the only one who plays this rhetorical game. Nick McKim plays this argument all the time (I last heard it when he was speaking at a church, no less). We can do better.

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