

2545

FOREWORD

Being Gay, Being Christian
By Dr. Stuart Edser

Struggle for the Soul of Contemporary Christianity

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

**BEING GAY, BEING CHRISTIAN
BY DR. STUART EDSER**

FOREWORD

STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

I hope that this book will gain a large readership amongst people of diverse sexualities: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transgender, intersexual and (a word I still getting used to) queer.

There was a time, not so long ago, when sexual minorities comprised people who were expected to be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. And to keep their sexuality a deep, dark hidden secret. Hidden from their families and communities life-long. Hidden from their neighbours. Above all, hidden from their religious friends. Did not the scriptures, from the ancient *Book of Leviticus*¹, condemn homosexual practice as an “abomination”? The punishment prescribed by the holiness code of the Old Testament was death. And so it was for centuries in the criminal laws of England, from whose books of law we in Australia inherited our criminal codes and statutes².

This was the situation when I was growing up in Australia. The *Crimes Act* of New South Wales³, in traditional language, imposed severe criminal punishments upon same-sex attracted men (women were

¹ *Leviticus*, 20, 13.

² M.D. Kirby, ‘The Sodomy Offence: England’s Least Lovely Criminal Law Export?’, (2011) 1 *Journal of Commonwealth Criminal Law* 22.

³ *Crimes Act* 1900 (NSW), SS.79-81 (“Unnatural Offences”).

ignored). These were the “unnatural offences”, involving the “abominable crime”. The fact that the acts were performed between consenting adults in private was no defence. For, so it was said, the *Bible* condemned these crimes as bringing an infection of sin into the body politic of the entire nation which was polluted by them.

Little wonder that generations of sexual minorities felt deeply alienated from themselves. Often they told no-one, not even close friends, about their state. They were expected to go through life celibate, denying themselves the loving relationships and tender companionships (not to say, sexual fulfilment) that heterosexuals enjoyed as of right. This was a very big ask. But being backed up with criminal sanctions, many responded with shame and self-denial.

Some homosexuals married, against the order of their natures, plunging another human being into the burdens of their life. Furtive, unstable, fleeting encounters was all that was generally available to them. Not a few sought release in suicide. Many were the victims of violence and humiliation. Could this really have been the imposition that a loving religion imposed upon people whose sexual orientation was slightly different from the majority? Was it really so impossible to be both Christian and gay?

Having been brought up in a loving Christian household, having attending the local Anglican Church and learning its familiar and welcoming ways, it seemed unlikely to me, at puberty, that I was truly ‘intrinsically evil’ and condemned to a life beyond the pale. That I was denied fulfilling love with other human beings and empathy with the society around me. Yet there are still good church people today who are

still of that mind⁴. Things are changing, slowly, in Australia. But globally, in most places, religion, even the Christian religion, seems pitched in a battle with the minority of individuals who discover that their sexuality does not conform strictly to the norm.

Then came the enlightenment. Substantially, it came first in the research and writings of scientists. Great writers in the psychological discipline, which the author Stuart Edser shares, began to question whether there was anything particularly “unnatural”, “evil” or “abominable” about the sexual minorities and their sexual expression: Richard Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, Evelyn Hooker and other psychologists dared to question the rationality of the hatred that was visited on sexual minorities. Their writings, in turn, stimulated an empirical search for evidence by the noted Professor of Zoology at Indiana University, Alfred Kinsey. Writing in the 1940s and 1950s, Kinsey detailed his investigations into sexual behaviour amongst human males and females. These appeared to establish that the sexual minorities were not insignificant in number; that they conformed to an apparently universal pattern; and that they reflected variations amongst human beings which were similar to other natural variations, such as skin colour, height, left-handedness and astigmatism. In short, the variations, scientifically speaking, were no big deal⁵. So why did the churches keep on propounding their message of hatred?

Be in no doubt that the messages of the churches often continue to this day, with vehemence and profound disrespect, not to say irrationality.

⁴ Read, for example, Gary Gibbs, *Homosexuality – Return to Sodom*, Amazing Facts Inc., Roseville, CA, 2005; E.G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, Pilgrim Books, 2nd ed., 2001.

⁵ Alfred Kinsey et al, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (W.B. Saunders, 1948); A. Kinsey et al, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (W.B. Saunders, 1953).

Writing in the journal of the Sydney diocese of the Anglican Church of Australia (my own denomination), the Archbishop of Sydney, Dr. Peter Jensen, recently declared, that denying rights to fellow citizens in same-sex unions was “not unjust – it is not even discrimination in the current sense of the word – but a refusal to call different things by the same name”⁶.

He asserted that same-sex marriage would result in “undermining of the family unit” and lead to “the normalisation of homosexuality”. And he went on:

“This claim for a right to be married could open the way for other forms, such as polygamous marriages or perhaps even marriage between immediate family members.”⁷

These remarkable assertions were written without any apparent reference to what has actually happened in the countries of the world that have begun dropping the exclusion of this group of citizens from the legal and civic rights enjoyed by others. There is no evidence whatsoever that polygamy or incest has increased, let alone been legalised, in The Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Massachusetts, Canada or any of the other countries that have so far opened up marriage to same-sex attracted couples.

Analogising adult long-term loving relationships to polygamy and incest was simply an unworthy way by which Archbishop Jensen was attempting to continue the denigration of same-sex citizens. Just as the

⁶ Leesha McKenny, “Same-sex marriage will lead to polygamy, says Jensen”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 2011, 5.

⁷ *Ibid*, *loc cit*.

church and religions have been trying to do for centuries⁸. It is shocking that these doings should happen today in the face of what is now a huge body of evidence that denies the assertion. Science and empirical evidence are the friends of reform and rationality. Little wonder that the enemies within the churches do not want to trouble themselves with research and evidence. Little wonder that they do not wish to hear the voices of their congregants who happen to be gay or the families and friend of those congregants.

Still, time is on the side of changing attitudes, at least in countries like Australia. The self-same news item that reported the dire predictions of Archbishop Jensen contained reports of a recent Galaxy Poll which found that three in four Australians believe that it is “inevitable” that same-sex couples will be allowed to marry⁹. If this poll is even partly accurate, it tends to show that there has been a huge swing-around in Australian opinions about the rights and dignity of gay people, that could certainly not have been predicted 60 years ago when Alfred Kinsey was writing and when I was growing up.

The contrast between Archbishop Jensen’s message and the message of the opinion poll could not have been more stark. Ordinary folks are simply no longer buying the stigma against same-sex people and the insistence that they are in some way unworthy, undeserving of civic equality and needful of humiliation and a permanent second-class status. That this change has happened so comparatively swiftly is itself an indication of the thirsting of informed humanity for rational and scientific responses to assertions of injustice. Where holy scripture

⁸ The Roman Catholic Church in Sydney is reportedly no different. See L. McKenny, “Catholic church that opens its arms to gays divides parishioners”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June 2011, 3.

⁹ For a fuller report, A.M. Potts, “Same-sex marriage ‘inevitable’”, *Sydney Star Observer*, 8 June 2011, 1.

appears to be contradicted by scientific knowledge, is it necessary for people like Archbishop Jensen to use their considerable intelligence, knowledge and power to return to the scriptures and to read them afresh, in the light of the growing body of factual materials now available – including the simple personal stories of gay people themselves¹⁰.

The changes that are happening in our world are not occurring only in Australia. Within recent weeks, two very important developments happened in the organs of the United Nations. For the first time, at the High Level Meeting on the HIV epidemic, held in the General Assembly in New York, that body accepted, by consensus, the need to acknowledge by name sexual minorities (specifically “men who have sex with men”) if the world was to get on top of the HIV/AIDS crisis and to help prevent the further spread of this deadly virus. Other relevant vulnerable groups were also given a name for the first time: “sex workers” and “injecting drug users”. The previous denigration, wrapped up in anonymising descriptions, was dropped¹¹. Science and reality won the day. Sadly, much of the opposition to this move in the General Assembly came from countries that pretend to religious adherence: Christian countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Islamic countries in the Arab lands, Iran and Asia and from the Holy See.

The week following the foregoing resolution of the General Assembly, came a decision of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations in Geneva. Once again, this time by majority, the Council agreed to condemn discrimination, stigmatisation and violence against sexual

¹⁰ Including the story of my own life. See A.J. Brown, *Michael Kirby: Paradoxes/Principles*, (Federation Press, Sydney, 2011) 84ff.

¹¹ United Nations, High Level Meeting in the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, *Declaration of Commitment*, adopted 10 June 2011.

minorities on a resolution proposed by two great Christian countries of the future: South Africa and Brazil. These developments show the gradual acceptance of the world we live in that the religious game of shame that we inherited from the past is coming to its natural close¹². It is religion, not science, that will have to adapt¹³.

Of course, great struggles remain to be fought. There is an inherent resistance on the part of rigid minds to revisit the texts of 'inerrant' scripture and to reconsider what those texts were trying to convey, by way of instruction, from earlier millennia to our current much better informed world. Unless the process of reconciliation of text and science can be expedited, and can succeed, the outcome of the conflict will be a continuing erosion in the numbers of believers, an ongoing decline in attendances at traditional houses of worship and a rising schizophrenia amongst congregants who love the fundamental messages and familiar forms of worship of their religions but cannot take seriously their 'out of touch' instruction on contemporary ethics affecting minorities in the human family¹⁴.

Some gay people, faced with continuing evidence of what they see as irrational and unloving attitudes towards them, their families and their friends, simply turn their backs on those who are currently in charge. My partner, Johan, is of this view: "I cannot understand how you can take these nasty people seriously", he says to me. "They have always been

¹² United Nations, Human Rights Council, "Resolution on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity", Geneva, 17 June 2011.

¹³ Earlier on 7 June 2011 at the Forty-First General Assembly of the Organisation of American States, all of the countries of the Americas and the Caribbean adopted a resolution condemning discrimination against people on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. They did so over lobbying of the Holy See.

¹⁴ Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in Twenty-First Century Australia*, Cambridge Uni Press, Cambridge, 2007: reviewed *Sociology of Religion* (2009), 496.

horrible to women, to people of colour and to gays". Sadly, there is some truth in what he says.

Others, like Stuart Edser and myself, ascribe the errors that they see to the small-mindedness of those who are presently in charge of our religion¹⁵. We have no doubt that, in the end, the loving kindness of the God of our beliefs and the spirit of reconciliation of the New Covenant will see the Christian church, or most of it, through to a new resolution. It will be a resolution informed by science and enlivened by love for one another: not misinformation, hatred and distain.

So the subjects of this book are timely, important and interesting. They represent nothing less than the story of the present struggle for the soul of Christianity. Will the formalists win? Will the essentialists win? How will the struggle reach its conclusion? One thing is sure: the present unhappy compromise is untenable. Christian churches cannot feel obliged by science to denounce 'discrimination' against people on the grounds of their sexual orientation, but still condemn those people (so newly released from abomination) to a life time of celibacy, loneliness and shame. A moment's rational thought suggests what the eventual outcome will be. The speed of change in the past 60 years indicates that a new accommodation will be reached. It will probably be much earlier than many of the present Australian religious leaders appear to think¹⁶.

¹⁵ There are other writers in the same genre, including Steven Ogden, *Love Upside Down*, O Books, Winchester, 2011; *ibid*, *I Met God In Bermuda – Faith in the 21st Century*, O Books, Winchester, 2009; Anthony W. Bartlett, *Virtually Christian*, O Books, Winchester, 2011.

¹⁶ On 21 June 2011, it was reported by AFP that the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom would 'update its rules' to allow celibate openly homosexual clergy to be consecrated as bishops. See *Choosing Bishops – The Equality Act 2010*, reported *The Australian*, 21 June 2011, 9.

For his thoughtful and informed contributions to this process of change, I thank Stuart Edser. I congratulate him on his book. Another pebble is thrown into the waters of life. The ripples are growing in strength. Their message is reaching the four corners of the earth.

Michael Kirby

Sydney
22 June 2011