Bringing freedom and order together in a fallen world



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The recent plebiscite on same-sex (or any gender) marriage has raised a number of issues for Australian society, and, indeed, for Western societies in general. A key concern is that of the basis upon which Western laws operate.

Over the last two hundred years or so, the notion has grown that Western secular societies operate best in a context of maximised freedoms standing on a thin moral base. Paradoxically, this has led to those who are most vehement in favour of homosexual rights to be most coercive when it comes to legislation.

Two possible responses

For example, the LBGTI activist, Rodney Croome has argued that 'Marriage Equality will Unlock a Better Future for Australia', and mocks the claims from what he calls the radical right: "bakers will be jailed for refusing to decorate gay wedding cakes, bishops will be hauled before tribunals simply for defending their definition of marriage, parents will have to accept radical sex education for their children." He would have us believe that "In other countries, marriage equality has benefitted children, strengthened families, and enhanced personal and religious freedoms."[1] It is not immediately obvious what country is in Croome's mind.

Croome portrays religious freedom as a confidence trick, and "a bid for power and privilege". Respect for the opposing view was never strong in Croome's mind, and he paints his opponents in the gloomiest colours: "I can understand why some people think baking a gay wedding cake is a trivial matter, but the next step is a sign in the window saying 'No Gays', and the step after that a sign that says 'No Muslims' or 'No Blacks'."[2] It has been a remarkably successful strategy which identifies disparate concepts: skin colour (over which none of us has any control) and beliefs (e.g. Islam, which I can believe or disbelieve) and sexual behaviour (which I may or may not practise).

Many others have argued in a similar way. Richard Ackland, a lawyer and a journalist, has urged that "It's unthinkable to extend the 'freedom' of churches when they have so conspicuously abused the freedoms they already have."[3] In the clash of competing freedoms, the LBGTQI community, and its allies, is close to advocating a 'winner-take-all' approach. Not since the days of Nero in the first century or Ernst Röhm of Nazi SA fame in the 1930s have the LBGTQI community come so close to ruling the political roost.

Croome, Ackland and their ilk often see themselves as champions standing up to potential, and real, clerical tyranny. Such an approach found some expression in medieval Christendom where Church and society were intertwined. This received its most graphic expression in Pope Boniface VIII's bull, Unam Sanctam, issued in 1302:

We are obliged by the faith to believe and hold - and we do firmly believe and sincerely confess - that there is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and that outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins ... Of this one and only Church there is one body and one head - not two heads, like a monster - namely Christ, and Christ's vicar is Peter, and Peter's successor, for the Lord said to Peter himself, 'Feed My sheep.'[4] 'My sheep' He said in general, not these or those sheep; wherefore He is understood to have committed them all to him …

And we learn from the words of the Gospel that in this Church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal. For when the apostles said, 'Behold, here' (that is, in the Church, since it was the apostles who spoke) 'are two swords' - the Lord did not reply, 'It is too much,' but 'It is enough.'[5] Truly he who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter, misunderstands the words of the Lord, "put up thy sword into the sheath."[6] Both are in the power of the Church, the spiritual sword and the material. But the latter is to be used for the Church, the former by her; the former by the priest, the latter by kings and captains but at the will and by the permission of the priest. The one sword, then should be under the other, and temporal authority subject to spiritual. For when the apostle says 'there is no power but of God, and the powers that be are ordained of God'[7] they would not be so ordained were not one sword made subject to the other ...

If, therefore, the earthly power err, it shall be judged by the spiritual power; and if a lesser power err, it can judged by a greater. But if the supreme power err, it can only be judged by God, not by man … For this authority, although given to a man and exercised by a man, is not human, but rather divine, given at God's mouth to Peter and established on a rock for him and his successors in Him whom he confessed, the Lord saying to Peter himself, 'Whatsoever thou shalt bind,' etc. Whoever therefore resists this power thus ordained of God, resists the ordinance of God ... Furthermore, we declare, state, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff.[8]

Modern LBGQTI crusaders may declare war on fourteenth century papal bulls and win applause and credibility in some circles, but it seems rather detached from modern reality.

Islam?

Into the moral vacuum left by a rising commitment to no morality except a professed, if distorted, tolerance and a receding sense of Christendom, Islam has emerged as a growing power. Western secular societies have trumpeted diversity but in fact have promoted a sense of being progressive, albeit in an empty and somewhat shifting way. It would be difficult to imagine much that could have given more encouragement to the demand for sharia than the recent plebiscite, where traditional Labor electorates in Western Sydney, populated by many Muslims, voted 'No'. One gets the impression that the secularists are only managing to feed an increasingly radicalised call for sharia.

The West has taken refuge in moral relativism, with its attendant emphasis on tolerance as the only remaining virtue.

This has led to increasing degradation. Some years ago, the Netherlands produced a two-hour film to help potential immigrants meet the demands of a new entrance test. It apparently shows a woman sunbathing topless, and two men kissing in a meadow. Abdou Menebhi, chairman of a Moroccan interest group in Amsterdam, had good reason to say: 'This isn't education, it's provocation.'[9]

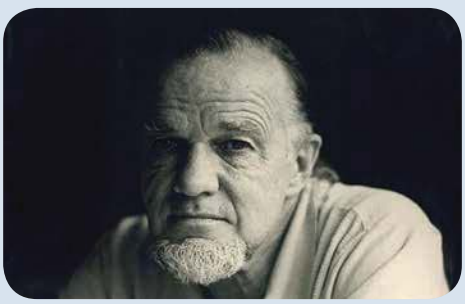
Andrew Bolt often manages to be quite insightful, but has been critical of Muslims who say 'no' to democracy, a secular society, and Australia first. He repudiates the Islamic view that "The overriding commitment of a Muslim is to Allah, and Allah alone," and cites Wafa Sultan: "It is a clash between civilisation and backwardness, between the civilised and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality. It is a clash between freedom and oppression, between democracy and dictatorship."[10] This misreads the problem, which is not only in Islam but in modern secular democracy.

A better Christian way

Francis Schaeffer argued that "What the Reformation's return to biblical teaching gave society was the opportunity for tremendous freedom, but without chaos."[11] Whereas Pope Boniface VIII saw Christendom in terms of one man ruling over all, including political leaders, the Reformers saw the political realm as deriving its authority directly from God, not indirectly from the pope (e.g. Romans 13:1-7). This became known as the doctrine of the two kingdoms. At its best, it did not relegate the Church to praying in the closet, and hand the state over to wild-eyed secularism. Rather, it provided a platform for both freedom and order. Governed by the Bible as the Word of God, the tyranny of either Church or state could be curbed.

What does the Bible teach?

In the Old Testament period Church and state were closely linked, although the distinction between the two entities was maintained. Israel was to operate as a kind of theocracy – its law was to be God's law. With regard to the law, it is customary to delineate the ceremonial law, the moral law, and the judicial law.



'Freedom without chaos' - Francis Schaeffer

The ceremonial law deals, for example, with the sacrificial system which operated before the coming of Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (compare Lev.1-16 and John 1:29). This law, of course, was fulfilled in Christ. The moral law is summarised in the Ten Commandments, but there are many other related moral laws in the Old Testament. The New Testament endorses the moral law of the Old Testament.

It is the judicial law which raises most cogently the relationship between Church and state in the Old Testament. Not only did God declare what was right and wrong but civil penalties were also enjoined. For example, stealing was forbidden, and God declared: 'If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep.' (Exodus 22:1) Not making proper restitution and other circumstances might lead to debt slavery for six years (Exodus 21:2-6; 22:3; Deuteronomy 15:12-18). There is no provision for imprisonment and fines payable to the state.

For more serious matters, the death penalty was allowed: for murder (Ex.21:12-14; note the mandate given in the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9:5-6), striking or cursing a parent (Ex.21:15; Leviticus 20:9), kidnapping (Ex.21:16), adultery (Lev.20:10-21), incest (Lev.20:11-12, 14), bestiality (Ex.22:19; Lev.20:15-16), homosexual acts (Lev.20:13), unchastity (Deut.22:20-21), rape of a betrothed virgin (Deut.22:23-27), witchcraft (Ex.22:18), offering human sacrifice (Lev.20:2), incorrigible delinquency (Deut.21:18-21), blasphemy (Lev.24:11-14, 16, 23), Sabbath desecration (Ex.35:2; Num.15:32-36), false prophecy (Deut.13:1-10), sacrificing to false gods (Ex.22:20), and refusing to accept a court decision (Deut.17:8-13). Israel's task was not only to proclaim God's moral law, but to enforce it in the civil sphere.

The civil sphere in pagan states was not rejected as such in the Old Testament period. Indeed, Joseph served the idolatrous government of Pharaoh in Egypt; and Daniel was later to serve the Babylonian and Persian governments. Esther also served as queen in the Persian court. Obedience to the state was generally expected: "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people."(Exodus 22:28) The apostle Paul considered himself bound by this law even when the high priest Ananias had commanded him to be struck on the mouth (Acts 23:1-5).[12] Yet the claims of spiritual and civil rulers were never regarded as absolute. The king himself was subject to the law of God (Deut.17:18-20). Leadership requires godly integrity (Psalm 78:72). It was because the Hebrew midwives feared God that they disobeyed Pharaoh's order to put all newborn Hebrew males to death (Ex.1:15-22).

Much later, in the sixth century B.C., Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego would not defile themselves with the Babylonian king's delicacies and wine (Daniel 1). Of more significance was the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego to bow down before the huge image of gold which Nebuchadnezzar had set up (Daniel 3). Under threat of being cast into a fiery furnace, the three Jews held faithfully to the God who claims absolute allegiance and who cannot be known through images. After the collapse of the Babylonian empire, the Medo-Persians decreed that for thirty days no one was to petition any god or man except the king, Darius the Mede. The aged prophet Daniel refused to deviate from his usual practice of praying to the God of Israel three times a day. As a result, he was cast into the lions' den (Daniel 6).

Not only did believing Israelites confront the claims of the pagan kings of Egypt, Babylon and Persia, but within Israel herself there remained a distinction between Church and state. It was God, not the king, who reigned over Israel (1 Samuel 8). Hence, in the name of the Lord, Samuel confronted Saul (1 Samuel 13, 15) and Elijah confronted Ahab (1 Kings 18-22). Kings were accountable to God, through His prophets, if they broke His law. Thus it was that Ahab was called to account by Elijah for his judicial murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21) and Jeremiah condemned Zedekiah for failing to free the slaves in Judah (Jer.34:8-22). In the terms of Samuel Rutherford, the great Puritan divine, it is a case of Lex Rex - the law of God, not any authority, is king of the realm.[13]

In the New Testament, the once-for-all and perfect sacrifice of Christ fulfils the sacrifices of the Old Testament (see Hebrews 5-10). In essence, the moral law of the Old Testament is endorsed in the New (e.g. Matthew 5:17-48; Luke 18:20; Romans 3:8-10; 1 John 2:3-4). The judicial law is different in that the New Testament Church was hardly in a position to influence the Roman Empire regarding the content of the civil law and the penalties for breaking it.

The New Testament maintains that the primary task of the state is not to engage in 'corrective services' but to administer justice (Romans 13:4) by praising those who do good and punishing evildoers (1 Peter 2:14). One of the few hints that is given regarding the perpetuity or otherwise of the judicial law is found in the account of Jesus' dealing with

the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11), which is contested but most likely authentic. Under Old Testament law, adultery attracted the death penalty (Levitius 20:10). In the New Testament the adulteress was not condemned by Jesus (John 8:11). However, there are other factors – the scribes and Pharisees were corrupt in their motives so Jesus would not support a travesty of justice. In any case, not every law-breaker in the Old Testament felt the full force of the law – God Himself protected the murderer Cain (Genesis 4:1-15) and David was forgiven by God despite his sins of adultery and murder by proxy (2 Samuel 11-12; see Psalm 51). It is this ambiguity about the New Testament's treatment of the judicial law that has made for considerable debate down through the ages concerning the right relationship between Church and state.

Obedience to God and/or the State

The starting point for any discussion of this issue must be the Lord's declaration that His followers were to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's (Matthew 22:21). There are thus two kings and two kingdoms – and Christ and His kingdom are not of this world (John 18:36-37). Like the Old Testament, the New Testament generally expects Christians to obey the state (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

Yet, as in the Old Testament, when the two kingdoms clash, the Christian's allegiance is clear: 'We must obey God rather than men.' (Acts 5:29) At such times, stated Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran martyr under Nazism, the Church can respond in three possible ways: it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate; it can aid the victims of state action; or the third possibility is 'not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.'[14] The state, which should be God's minister (Romans 13:4), can become satanic (Revelation 13, 17).

Bringing freedom and order together in a fallen world

The Bible does not commit itself to any particular form of civil government – monarchy, oligarchy or democracy. The effects of the Fall are to be seen everywhere. We are not to fall for the lie that Christianity and democracy are the same thing. There is no tyranny quite like a democratic tyranny – both Nazism and Communism existed as mass movements. Ryszard Legutko warns that there are totalitarian temptations in free societies,[15] while Peter Kurti has spoken of 'The Tyranny of Tolerance'.[16] The Fall affects all humanity, including the political sphere, and in itself democracy will not save us from that.

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution affirms that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.' Since then, new meaning has been poured into Thomas Jefferson's call for a 'wall of separation between Church and State'. Prayers – to cite just one example – have been illegal in American public schools since 1963. Religious freedom owes much to the doctrine of separation, but its weak point is located in the fact that moral neutrality is an impossibility.

The Western world, not believing in Augustine's City of God, is left only with the city of this world. Such a situation can be quite sinister, as exemplified by Mussolini's outlook: 'Everything *for* the state. Nothing *against* the state. Nothing *outside* the state.'[17] Even in its milder forms, Lord Melbourne, in opposing William Wilberforce's campaign against the slave trade, lamented: 'Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life.'[18]

Where does this leave us? The nineteenth century Free Church scholar James Bannerman rejected the claim that the state could be morally neutral, and considered that "without an appeal to God in some shape or other, the offices of civil society were impossible."[19] Ideally: "The Church and the state, because equally the servants of Christ, are helps made and meet for each other." In the Bible both freedom and order are precious. Without order, each man simply does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25); without freedom there is only the yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1). Order can become tyranny, freedom can become chaos. Christians are not to withdraw from the world but operate as salt and light within it (Matthew 5:13-14; John 17:14-16). That is why John Newton advised William Wilberforce to remain in the British parliament to fight the slave trade rather than enter the Christian ministry.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us that the first message of the Church to the state was not 'Make politics Christian' but 'recognise finitude'. Yet he also claimed that "The place of the decalogue is both in the church and in the government building."[22] The Church is not to be politicised, yet faith is not to be confined to the realm of private piety. Law, whether civil, ceremonial or moral, is not the power of God unto salvation. It can restrain sin, point out sin, and lead us in the right way, but only the gospel can save us. Whatever church must remain the Church.



To argue for moral neutrality is to argue for fantasia; to argue for humanistic ethics is to build a house on shifting sand.

Early in 2016 two Texan philosophers, Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle, argued that philosophy had become increasingly irrelevant as it had departed from goodness: "The point of philosophy now is to be smart, not good. It has been the heart of our undoing."[23] The same point can be made about politics and law. To argue for moral neutrality is to argue for fantasia; to argue for humanistic ethics is to build a house on shifting sand. As Scripture says, it is righteousness that exalts a nation and it is sin that degrades it (Prov.14:34).

When King Jehoshaphat appointed judges in all the fortified cities of Judah, he told them: 'Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the Lord. He is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the Lord our God, or partiality or taking bribes' (2 Chronicles19:6-7). As Abraham came into the land of Gerar, he feared that its inhabitants would seize upon his wife, Sarah, so he passed her off as his sister. The reason – or excuse – that he gave later was that there was no fear of God in the place (Gen.20:11). The reasoning is fine, but the truth is that the fear of God is not something that can readily be brought about by a king's decree or an act of parliament. Righteousness requires an internal, as well as an external, component.

This is in harmony with the teaching of Scripture. Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, of the Spirit of God (John 3:1-8). As a Pharisee, Nicodemus knew the law of God, but he did not know that without the Holy Spirit, he could not understand the things of God and be saved. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. The mind that is set on the flesh (which is not just pornography and illicit sex but everything apart from the Spirit of God) is hostile to God, and does not submit to God's law, and indeed, cannot (Romans 8:7-8). Hence the solution to lawlessness is not necessarily to be found



Democracy without righteousness will only make for moral chaos, even totalitarianism.

in passing more laws. It is the Spirit of God who confronts the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-26). The law has its place, but even the very law of God Himself was never meant to solve everything. The law of God has to be written upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit before we can live as forgiven and free beings before God (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8).

The fallacy into which the modern West has fallen is at this very point. We are moralistic – indeed, there is plenty of moral outrage today – without any clear definition of morality. We need law - more specifically we need good laws – but we need more than good laws. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev.19:16), but He did not come primarily to be a lawgiver to His people. When someone wanted Jesus to intervene in a family quarrel, Jesus replied: "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" (Luke 12:14) After feeding the five thousand (men), Jesus perceived that the crowd was keen to take Him by force and make Him king. His response was to withdraw to the mountain by Himself (John 6:15). Christ is indeed king, but His kingdom, as He told Pilate, is not from this world (John 18:36).

The right perspective was understood by P. T. Forsyth, the British Congregationalist preacher who died in 1921, when he stated that "The age, and much of the Church, believes in civilization and is interested in the Gospel, instead of believing in the Gospel and being interested in civilization."[24] The truth is that politics is neither all-embracing nor irrelevant in its importance. As Dr Johnson cautioned us:

> How small, of all that human hearts endure,
> That part which laws or kings can cause or cure!

We can engage in political activity – as a Roman citizen, the apostle Paul demanded an apology from the authorities at Philippi for his public beating and imprisonment (Acts 16:37); he avoided a scourging at Jerusalem (Acts 22:25); and he appealed to Caesar, no less a figure than the madman Nero (Acts 25:11). Nevertheless, Christ sent him not to engage in political action but to preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:17). As Christ prayed in His high priestly prayer, His followers are to be in the world, but not of the world (John 17:11-16). Like all the saints down through the ages, Christians seek a heavenly country (Heb.11:16). Hence they are not overly keen to put their trust in princes – or parliaments for that matter (Psalm 118:8-9). Back in the eighteenth century, the evangelical Baptist, Andrew Fuller, warned with regard to the English Whigs and Tories: "it is not for the wise and the good to enlist themselves under their respective standards, or to believe half what they say."[25]

Those who try to achieve a paradise through the law are likely to achieve an inferno. There is more to reality than politics and law. The 1936 Soviet Constitution was perhaps the twentieth century's most liberal sounding constitution, but it was promulgated during the heyday of the brutal dictator Josef Stalin. While Stalin murdered his friends and his enemies in their millions, Soviet citizens were guaranteed all kinds of rights and freedoms. It is all too easy to espouse a political solution to what is a moral and spiritual problem. If Western civilization is to be spared, it must be revived. More is needed than a plethora of Christian political legislation.

Civilization depends on what might be called 'a commitment to the unenforceable'. Simone Weil's view was that "the proper function of religion" was to "suffuse with its light all secular life, public or private, without ever in any way dominating it."[26] There may be a certain naivety in that hope, but it does seek to combine the twin ideals of justice and service – to serve the world without becoming a part of it, and to engage in politics without becoming political. Here is a realistic hope for the future, which knows the reality of human limitations and human sin, and also the power of God's Spirit and goodness.

The Reformation emphasis on freedom and order, law and grace, the reality of the Fall and the beauty of holiness is needed today. Martin Luther did not believe that it was merciful to run a sinful world using the Sermon on the Mount as one's law-code. "Sheer clemency is the greatest inclemency," he warned.[27] Yet he balanced this with his comment that "Strict justice is the greatest injustice."[28]To this we can add the insights of Augustine: "A law rooted in Christ is a law tempered with mercy."[29]

Democracy – or 'Australian values' – without an undergirding in righteousness will only make for moral chaos and disintegration, or even a form of totalitarianism. To push back the tide of coarseness, sensationalism, vulgarity, and immorality, and to promote a greater commitment to decency, honesty, faithfulness, and stable family relationships, we need to work and pray for God's Word and for God's Spirit.

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