

‘No’ vote best for human flourishing

- MARK COLERIDGE
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I’ve been told people are looking for guidance on same-sex marriage as we move towards the postal vote. That may be so, though I suspect that most people have already made up their mind on the issue and, if they’re looking for anything, they’re wanting some authority to support their position publicly. But that’s not really what I want to do here. By now the arguments for and against same-sex marriage are well enough known to those who want to know them, even if much of the debate has been too shallow or slick to do justice to the deeper issues. So there’s no need for me to go over well-trodden ground. But in a debate where the language has often been slippery it may help to clarify a few points that can be unclear. I wrote something like what follows a while ago. In the meantime, the debate has become more complex and heated, so I’ve made a few changes to take account of that.

Is same-sex marriage about love?

There are many forms of love — parent-child, siblings, friends, carers and so on. But not all are nuptial. In fact, only one form of love is nuptial — the love of man and woman which is free, lifelong and open to children. Other forms of love may indeed be love and often are. That means that they have value, yes; but it doesn’t mean that they are or could become marriage.

Is it about equality?

It’s true that all human beings are equal. But that doesn’t mean they are the same. Same-sex marriage ideology implies that equality means sameness. But it doesn’t. I may be different, but I’m still equal. Marriage policy has almost always “discriminated” against certain people: parents can’t marry their children, brother and sister can’t marry, those under age can’t marry. Nor can people of the same sex. That doesn’t make them any less equal.

Is it about civil rights?

Here the link is made to women’s rights and racial equality. But the law already offers ample protection for people in same-sex unions in a way that wasn’t true of women or people of other races in earlier times. Are people in same-sex unions excluded from voting, entering shops or using public transport? Justice can be done to people in same-sex unions and their human dignity can be respected without resorting to an artificially constructed “right” to marry.

Are heterosexuality and homosexuality equivalent?

In the construction of any human society, heterosexuality has been privileged because it alone can secure the future by producing children. Only a society which sees children as optional and the future as something of no great concern would see heterosexuality and homosexuality as equivalent.

Are children an optional extra?

Without resorting to extraordinary measures, same-sex couples can't produce children — not just because of age or sterility but because of biological impossibility. Yet bringing children to birth and raising them in a stable environment is fundamental to marriage, which remains true even if a married couple can't conceive. The two purposes of marriage are unitive and procreative. They are deeply interrelated. Yet same-sex marriage would separate them radically, which means that it can't be marriage.

Is marriage only about two individuals?

Marriage has always been regarded as essentially social, binding families together in new configurations and serving as the basic cell in constructing a human society which has a future. Marriage is a social institution. That's why it's important to speak of the common good when speaking of marriage; it's also why same-sex marriage ideology focuses much more on supposed individual rights than on the common good.

Do gender and biology matter?

Same-sex marriage ideology says that gender difference is a social construct and that it doesn't matter for marriage. It also says that the body, or biology, is of no final significance. This is linked to a denial of "nature" — to a sense that anything may be "natural" or "unnatural". It implies a refusal to accept that there are any "givens" and an insistence that autonomous individuals can make of themselves what they will.

Has humanity got marriage wrong until recently?

Same-sex marriage ideology is a dramatic form of the Western myth of progress which the facts of history have never confirmed. It seems arrogant or ignorant to claim that all cultures through the millenniums have been wrong on this fundamental point. Not that every society has got marriage right in every way. But societies have agreed that marriage is between a man and a woman. To disregard this time-tested, cross-cultural wisdom is to succumb to the amnesia which is one of our cultural wounds.

Will the non-Western world eventually catch up with the West?

Non-Western cultures are often perplexed by the push for same-sex marriage in the West, but this isn't necessarily a sign that they are less civilised — even though the West tends to think that the rest of the world, if it isn't like the West, either should be or will be eventually. It may well be that non-Western cultures will help preserve for humanity values which were once fundamental to Western cultures.

Are those who don't favour same-sex marriage homophobic and bigoted?

It's possible to oppose same-sex marriage in ways that are respectful and open-minded. But in an ideologically conditioned world of "all or nothing" or "black and white", those who oppose same-sex marriage are often denigrated in an attempt to discredit or silence them. There's a violence in this, which is resistant to the truthful debate we need.

A former federal minister once claimed that truth counted for little in Australian politics. That may be so. But truth surely counts for much when a society and its political leaders are making decisions about something as fundamentally important as marriage. That's why the claims made by those pushing for same-sex marriage are an unreliable basis for a decision which is much more than political. This debate is about the meaning of marriage, and that's why it's important that everyone has their say in the postal vote. I'll be voting No, not

because I wish ill of any kind on those in same-sex unions who have the same need for love and the same right to happiness as anyone else. I'll be voting No because I think it's the only way available of affirming values which are fundamental to true human flourishing and of guarding against unwanted consequences in the long term. A No vote may seem negative but, in a debate where things have rarely been what they seem, No is Yes and Yes is No.

Mark Coleridge is the Archbishop of Brisbane.

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