

How to avoid the charge of homophobia

Evangelical Christians who are opposed to homosexual behaviour sometimes complain that they find it impossible to express their moral objections on this score without being accused of homophobia. To some extent the complaint is probably justified. However, in many cases I suspect that the charge of prejudice is one these Christians bring upon themselves, either by the content of their opinions or the style in which they are voiced. Let me offer, therefore, a few pieces of advice to any such would-be moraliser.

Be sensitive

Even if you are addressing the annual conference of Reform or writing an article for the Church of England Newspaper, your words will be heard further afield, not just by people who support your opinions but by gay Christians who are included in your attack. Homosexuals have been victims of persecution for centuries. In particular, most gay Christians have experienced discrimination of one kind or another from within the Church. You are addressing, then, a community that has become habituated to abuse and contempt. It is not surprising if they tend to assume that all those who speak hostile words against homosexuality share the homophobic prejudice to which they have grown accustomed.

This misunderstanding is all the more likely because many evangelical Christians wish to interpret "homosexual" as a chosen lifestyle rather than an innate identity. Gays themselves find it hard to believe that anyone still clings to this culturally anachronistic perspective, especially since it is so utterly incompatible with their own experience of the homosexual condition. As a result, their interpretation of anti-gay polemic is often complicated by an element of argument at cross-purposes. The two sides do not share the same presuppositions, and so inevitably end up accusing one another of being obtuse.

If you really want to avoid this, you must remember that all communication consists not in what is said, but in what is heard. Try putting yourself in the shoes of a gay Christian and reflect on how they are likely to understand your words. Similar efforts have to be made these days in commenting on many other sensitive areas. The police must watch their language when they challenge afro-caribbean youths in Brixton. Businessmen have had to learn to speak with extra caution when dealing with female staff. Some preachers have made efforts in the direction of inclusive language. The vocabulary we choose, the jokes we crack, the stereotypes we endorse—verbal carelessness of many kinds can betray the presence of prejudice buried so deep in our vocabulary we do not even recognise its offensive potential.

Of course, it is easy to disparage the appeal for more sensitivity in this area as mere "political correctness". And, up to a point, such impatience is understandable. Activists within racial minorities and militant feminists have sometimes exploited the emotive overtones in words like "racist" or "sexist" in order to foster a culture of suspicion within their respective communities. No doubt pro-gay campaigners have sometimes unjustly smeared their opponents as homophobes in a similar way. However, a little pre-emptive tact is all that it takes to forestall such unjust criticisms, if you really do wish to avoid them.

Be rational

Prejudice, by definition, is irrational. It feeds on superstitious taboos, distorted caricatures and just plain ignorance. All these factors contribute to homophobia. Most gay Christians find it impossible to understand the reason for the Church's traditional negativism towards the kind of relationships for which their hearts yearn. They put it in the same category of embarrassing ecclesiastical gaffes as witch-trials, anti-semitism and the crusades. To them

the current anti-gay movement among evangelicals seems as ludicrously out-of-date as the flat-earth society. It must reflect prejudice, they say, because it is so utterly irrational. The way to avoid this charge is to make sure your opinions are rigorously argued.

For instance, gays are often damned with the adjective "unnatural". They, not unreasonably reply "unnatural for whom?" The potential for same-sex covenant love to exceed heterosexual marriage in its capacity to generate personal devotion and self-sacrifice is clearly attested in story of David and Jonathan. Was their friendship "unnatural"? The Church replies that by "unnatural" it does not mean homophile affection as such, but the genital acts to which such affection may lead. But again gays are perplexed because there is nothing they do in the pursuit of sexual fulfilment which cannot be found among heterosexuals. If the Church's real argument is with oral and anal intercourse, why is it only gays who are being targeted? And why are the many co-habiting gays who, for reasons of their own, abstain from penetrative sex not exempted from the Church's vilification?

Again, homosexuals are often told their behaviour is "unbiblical"—to which they reply "unbiblical according to whom?" That there are biblical texts that have been traditionally understood to mean that all expressions of homosexuality are wrong is undeniable. But tradition has proven a notoriously dangerous guide throughout church history. Responsible biblical interpreters recognise that reason has an indispensable role to play in distinguishing valid tradition from hallowed mistakes. No doubt in areas of abstruse doctrine like the Trinity it may be sometimes defensible to take refuge in "mystery". Truths of revelation may sometimes appear counter-intuitive. However, that kind of concession to irrationality is not sustainable in the area of ethics. Moral imperatives are only cogent if they are perceived to make sense.

In that connection, Jesus himself countered the complexity of scribal casuistry with his assurance that the whole of our moral duty could be summed up in two great commandments: love God and love your neighbour. The experience of gay Christians, however, is that committed homophile relationships breach neither of these prime directives. They reason that the biblical texts which appear to condemn homosexuality must, therefore, reflect certain kinds of homosexual activity in the ancient world which did contravene the twin laws of love. This could be either because they were exploitative/abusive (contra the love of neighbour) or associated with idolatry (contra the love of God). This interpretation of the texts seems to them perfectly reasonable. Those who wish to insist that homosexuality is "unbiblical" must demonstrate, therefore, what it is about same-sex relationships that make them wrong. Posturing that does not get beyond "the Bible says so" smacks of the crudest form of fundamentalist obscurantism.

Most important of all, if you are determined to insist that homosexuality should be treated as a sin, you must provide some rational evidence of the harm it does. All we are told in this connection is that it damages "the family". Gay Christians simply do not understand the logic of this charge. Is the implication that thousands of young people would choose homosexuality as an alternative to heterosexual marriage if the Church rescinded its ban? The idea is patently ridiculous. What then is it about homosexuality that is so dangerous that it must be eliminated from the Church at all costs? If you do not want to be considered a homophobic bigot you must at least make an effort to explain this rationally.

Be consistent

Prejudice is invariably discriminatory. It selects a certain group of people as the object of its loathing and ignores others. It seems to the gay community that in targeting them evangelical Christians are displaying precisely this kind of selectivity. They observe that a strong case can be made, both from tradition and scripture, against usury, abortion and

divorce. But evangelicals do not seem to be mounting public campaigns to have bankers, gynaecologists and divorcees excommunicated or excluded from public ministry. On the contrary, a sweet reasonableness permits such individuals to continue in fellowship. Why are gays singled out for the evangelical anathema?

Two answers are usually given to this:

The first is that homosexuality is a peculiarly serious crime. But, once again, we must know why? More serious than the cruel burden of debt inflicted on the poorest nations of the world? More serious than the dismembering of unborn children? More serious than a direct challenge to the word of Christ himself about the inviolability of the marriage bond?

The second answer is that the pro-homosexual lobby has been so brazen in its flaunting of "gay rights" that evangelicals have been forced to take counter-measures. Gays might have been allowed to stay in the closet, we are assured, but they have insisted on public recognition and awoken the sleeping dragon of moral outrage as a result.

But there is long history of Christian minorities campaigning for their "rights". Protestants and Catholics both did so in the sixteenth century. Anabaptists and Quakers did so in the seventeenth century. Slaves did so in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Women did so in the twentieth century. In each case, the authority of the Bible and of tradition were invoked and political power was deployed in order to prevent change. Yet now everybody recognises that these minorities had a just cause and should in no way have yielded to the institutionalised intimidation that sought to silence their protests. Is it not reasonable to believe that homosexuals may be the latest in this catalogue of groups who have had to fight prejudice to secure toleration? Since evangelicals have historically on many occasions been numbered among those persecuted minorities themselves, would it not be more consistent if they defended the "rights" of gays rather than complaining about those brave individuals who have "come out" in order to secure justice for their community?

Be humble

It is always easier to identify arrogance in others than in oneself. No doubt the strident assertions of some pro-gay activists lack meekness, or even courtesy. Raised voices and immoderate words are all too often symptoms of chronically inflated egos, and both the gay and anti-gay lobbies certainly have their share of these.

However, there is more dangerous form of arrogance than simple big-headedness. Prejudice is particularly menacing when it is coupled to an arrogant assertion of absolute certainty. Karl Popper in his seminal study *The Open Society* demonstrated how small the gap is between "I am sure I'm right" and "Therefore, I must be obeyed". It was the absolute certainty of fascism and communism that made them capable of genocide. It was the absolute certainty of Muslim fundamentalism that led to the carnage of September 11th. Christians too have been guilty of frightful acts of tyranny and atrocity in the past. In fact, any creed that purports to have access to "Truth" can be subverted in this way.

Of course, the response of post-modernism has been to deny all claims to absolute certainty by radically relativising the meaning of "Truth". But evangelicals refuse to throw the baby out with the bathwater in that way; and rightly so in my view. It is perfectly possible to witness to the infallibility of Scripture without surrendering to authoritarianism, and it is absolutely crucial at this juncture in the cultural history of the West that we demonstrate that possibility to the watching world. Failure to do so will result in evangelicalism being stigmatised along with the Taliban; and again, rightly so.

The only sense in which homosexuality can rightly be said to be a "defining issue" for the Church today is that it crucially tests the ability of Christians to eschew fundamentalist fanaticism and to hold the divine Word of truth in humility.

Homophobic bigotry—or just conscientious objection?

To sum up then, if you would avoid the charge of homophobia you must demonstrate:

the *sensitivity* that chooses tactful words;

the *rationality* that offers arguments rather than assertions;

the *consistency* that expresses equal indignation about other social issues;

and, perhaps most important of all, the *humility* to admit that you might be wrong.

You may complain that pro-gay speakers and writers do not show such consideration to you. Instead your sincere moral convictions have been denounced as homophobic bigotry. I acknowledge that this could be true. But, however unfair the misrepresentation of your views, the situation is not symmetric. Christian gays are not trying to eject you from the Church or from ministry, you are trying to eject them.

In law a verdict of "Not Guilty" requires only the establishment of "reasonable doubt". Even if you feel the case against gays has been proved, there are other members of the jury who are less convinced. No one wishes to shut you up, but what you say and how you say it makes a huge difference.

Dr Roy Clements