GAY COUPLES WITH CHILDREN
DESERVE OUR BLESSING

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On Monday, on ABC television's Q&A, I made two confessions.

One was that I am a believing Catholic. Though spectacularly unsatisfactory in every way, irregular in my practice, far from diligent in observance, guilty of countless derelictions, not remotely bound in public policy by church positions or any such, I do actually believe in the Catholic Church and its message.

I believe it is true and I believe it is good.

At the same time, I now think the state should recognise same-sex marriages.

How can I reconcile these two positions?

I no longer think there is any serious case for the state to enforce the Catholic, or more broadly Christian, traditional view of marriage.

One of the benefits of the government's decision to hold a plebiscite on this is the way it has forced many people, myself included, to think through the issue more deeply than before.

At one level the argument is predominantly symbolic. Civil unions now have more or less the same legal rights as marriages.

I don't underrate symbols. But the most important question of substance, not the only question but the most important one, is children. It is widely accepted now that gay couples have children.

Whether these children are from previous marriages or relationships, IVF treatments, adoptions or whatever, plenty of children are growing up with gay parents.

So the most important question is what is best for the kids.

The best thing for the children is that their parents be in a committed, stable relationship. If legal marriage reinforces that, then that's a social good.

Similarly for the adults themselves. If they want to make a commitment to a relationship and bring it extra legal sanction, I can't see why the state should deny that any longer.

The arguments for the traditional view are substantial, and people who hold them should not be branded as homophobic or bigoted unless they actually express homophobic or bigoted views.

The only real danger to legalising gay marriage is that it may lead to some restriction on religious freedom. This is not the nonsensical non-issue of Christian clerics being forced to solemnise marriages they don't approve of. That will never happen.

The much likelier danger is that our often counter-productive human rights bureaucracies will deem it an offence for people to propound traditional Christian teaching. That would be wrong. It is only in that one specific area I think really ugly polarisation could come about.

There should be some general protection for the churches. If the proponents of same-sex marriage are smart enough to accommodate this level of religious freedom, I don't think this reform should cause any distressing social polarisation at all.

Malcolm Turnbull is right to ask participants in this debate to speak with some civility to each other. Whenever you are dealing with someone's identity, or their deepest religious beliefs, it is surely not too much to ask for some manner of respect.

What then of the churches?

I am not asking them to change their own doctrines or their own practices. Doctrine can and does evolve but that is not my argument in this case. I think the churches do themselves a disservice by trying to hang on to the very few specifically Christian enforcement elements of an ambient culture of long ago, at least a half-century or more, when the culture explicitly acknowledged its Christian inspiration and the attempt to form institutions in accordance with Christian norms.

No Western society was ever really a Christian society. But past injustices don't invalidate Christian inspiration; they invalidate, or show the weakness of, the efforts to implement the inspiration. And in any modern, secular state, of course, religion should be a matter of conscience within the bounds of the normal law.

Churches are mistaken to try to hang on to old elements of legal enforcement of a bygone social orthodoxy. The empty pews of the Anglican Church in England show how little that offers, how sterile an approach to contemporary life that is.

Of course, Christian activists don't see themselves as trying to hang on to institutional privilege but rather as defending basic social goods.

I have the greatest sympathy with them. I think the failing of traditional Christianity across the Western world is the greatest single cultural crisis we face. It is very much an open question whether a civilisation can survive without transcendent belief.

But the churches would be much better to recognise themselves as minorities in Western society and indeed to demand minority rights. They need to advocate for the Christian vision of the good life but not primarily through legal enforcement.

Already a huge proportion of the marriages the state recognises are not approved marriages as far as some churches are concerned.

Catholic orthodoxy has it that normally you cannot remarry after divorce. For a long time Ireland enforced this prohibition.

But now that society has accepted no-fault divorce, it's up to Christians to propound their vision of marriage through means other than the law. If they wanted to they could engage in their own voluntary legal arrangements beyond those of the state. There is no prospect at all of the state taking things back to the old days for them. And in reality that's not the state's job anyway.

Some arguments some Christians make against gay marriage I positively disagree with.

The talk of a "stolen generation" being made up of children in gay couples because they are not with both their biological parents is an attack really on all non-biological parents. It's a bad attack.

I have always been a million per cent supporter of adoption, interracial adoption, any kind of adoption. The only criterion for being a good parent is to love the child unreservedly.

In Christian tradition nothing is more powerful than the Holy Family—Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Central to the story of the incarnation is the fact Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus. I find the example of Joseph a profound inspiration to all stepfathers.

This is not a theological interpretation. It's merely the inspiration I find in the gospels, a source I generally never quote in political discussion.

We have to recognise that we live in an essentially post-Christian society. The legal and religious institutions of marriage should part company.

That's a challenge for religious folks—to try to live up to their ideals and win people to these ideals. And it's an opportunity for others to fashion as good a life as they might.