

On climbing out from being thrown under the bus: Queer Faith futures in a cisgender political world

**A paper by the Revd Dr Josephine Inkpin for APSA *Religion and Politics Workshop*
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Firstly, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, their elders past and present. Addressing the ‘original sin’ of dispossession, and its consequences, is also, I believe, the major issue we face in these lands now called Australia.

Without seeking any equivalence with First Nations peoples, I also note similar dynamics in the struggles of queer people, especially those of faith. I will return to intersectionality later. It is important at the outset however, to signal how ‘colonialist’ ways of thinking and operating oppress various groups, often deliberately playing us off against one another. The highly manufactured supposed ‘conflict’ between cisgender and transgender women is but one such debilitating strategy. The framing of minority peoples and concerns as ‘problems’; the resistance to (re)naming of experiences and voices; the maintenance of dependence cultures; the creation of distorting narratives; the fostering of lateral violence; the limiting of resources and agency even by supposed committed ‘allies’; the avoidance of real justice and empowerment – all are felt widely across communities denied the privileges of others. Those of us who hold privileges therefore need to look regularly at their implications and use.

I begin personally. For not only is it a truism that ‘the personal is political’ but so is the spiritual, especially in queer spaces and contemporary politics. Trans people, just in existing visibly are political ‘issues’, in church and society. As I now openly live in a same gender marriage, with another priest, that adds further dimensions. In that regard, during the marriage equality postal survey, Christians for Marriage Equality approached me about highlighting my marriage in the media. I said yes, if it would be helpful, but suggested they check if the wider ‘Yes’ campaign would

be keen. As expected, I heard no more. For it was abundantly clear to gender diverse people that, whilst our actual and potential marriages were also under scrutiny, the mainstream 'Yes' campaign had little interest in us. Moreover, even as the 'No' campaign made us high profile targets, we found no defenders. It felt, not for the first time, that we were being thrown under the proverbial bus.

The postal survey revealed how powerfully our culture and politics is governed by gender binaries. These are too often simply unquestioned and, at least unconsciously, typically consolidated by cisgender opinion formers. In 2017 the dominant 'yes' campaign theme was that good queer people were just like other good cisgender people. Consequently, we saw almost exclusive representation of, very wholesome, gay and lesbian couples from all kinds of largely 'safe' walks of life, with underlying bourgeois emphasis. In contrast, the 'no' campaign concentrated on gender diversity: presented as weird, disturbing and undermining of conventional families, schools, and 'life as we know it'. Pushed out of sight under the wheels of the marriage equality vehicle, little wonder many gay advocates were then surprised after the decisive Federal Parliament vote when transgender people pointed out that victory was actually *not* yet complete. Continuing legal issues alone included the so-called 'forced divorce' regulations in some Australian States. As I and others experienced in Queensland, achieving such basic Births, Deaths and Marriages changes has proven arduous, with influential progressive groups, such as Rainbow Labor, dragging their feet.

There were similarities in subsequent political, cultural and media battles over religious 'freedom'. Most startling was how dominant forces within the ALP seemed happy to let others endure the heat of the day and then claimed victory as their own. Thanks be, rather, for the blessed Bridget Archer, and others who stood up, at some risk, alongside the real hardworking advocates and allies. Meanwhile contemporary governing political priorities ignore major transgender issues, not least

the shocking absence of substantial assistance for body transitions (including surgeries, hormones, counselling) and other health and social supports found overseas. These in themselves are very costly in various senses, and specific issues which LGB folk do not experience, never mind our accompanying employment, housing and other demanding challenges.

I will not rehearse the statistics of transgender people's pain – even though on Sunday the Trans Day of Remembrance will again mark the literally murderous effects of transphobia. It is surely enough to point out how we remain at the top of LGBTIQ+ self-harm and suicide registers, including being twice as likely to suffer in educational settings as gay students. We are a minority within a minority and, as active informed allies like Peter Tatchell have observed, our liberation is at least 10 and perhaps 20 years behind gay and lesbian people, even in more 'advanced' nations. Current US and UK legal and other battles now centre on us, with transphobic women and separatist groups such as the LGB Alliance supported by influential media and highly prominent people. Katherine Deves' damaging efforts at the last federal election is but one vivid expression of the active promotion of transphobic politics, an insidious disease which has even affected The Greens.

Religion helps lead this use of transphobia as a weapon, a wedge tactic and a distraction from the real, and intersectional, needs of gender diverse people. For anti-LGBTIQ+ people, it seems that, to rework Samuel Johnson, religion 'is the last refuge of the scoundrel.' Here, outright bigotry and abuse does not even need to be veiled but can be actively promoted without seeming accountability to either reason or the common good. The picture is also complex when we examine the particularity of faith spaces. For no mainstream Christian tradition can claim to affirm the full dignity of LGBTIQ+ people. Research, as well as anecdotal experience, has even shown that parts of the Metropolitan Community Church have some way to go in working through elements of patriarchalism, sexism and transphobia. The often vaunted Uniting Church values of 'justice' and

'inclusivity' are certainly patchy, particularly where gender diversity is involved. My experience, as an Anglican priest serving in the UCA, is of a significant 'trans deficit', contrasting with progress in some Anglican quarters as growing number of transgender priests have emerged.

In both politics and religion, and in their intersection, marriage equality paradigms thus still govern our 'debates'. This begins with terminology, including the use of 'same sex' as the notorious go-to phrase for media, as well as others. Too often issues are phrased in such simplistic binary terms. This assists the Right, deliberately seeking to occlude some of us and focus on reinforcing narrow visceral and confused reactions. Classic is the key set of essays of the Anglican Church of Australia's Doctrine Commission, published in 2019, entitled *Marriage, Same-sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*. This not only failed to include even *one* out queer Anglican contributor but deliberately excluded both transgender and intersex people from its considerations. For including us would be to shatter the 'same sex' frameworks and to shift theological and political consideration both towards the recognition of kaleidoscopic human diversity and to marriage as a vehicle for the nurture of quality relationships rather than a status symbol and patriarchal control mechanism. This is even more developed in the Roman Catholic Church, whose 'natural law' approach will remain deficient until it admits contemporary medical and scientific consensus, as well as gender diverse voices and experiences themselves.

The Uniting Church represents much of the muddle of 'middle-of-the-road', 'liberal', Australia. Whilst making some space for LGBTIQ+ people, it remains conflicted and half-hearted. A shift is needed from 'inclusion', typically understood passively, to active empowerment. Not only are sunset clauses needed on obviously continuing religious discrimination: where LGBTIQ+ people can be welcomed in some postcodes, some schools and other spaces, but excluded in others. There needs to be major shifts in language and resources. For decades the UCA has forged the way in

authentic equality of cisgender women and men. Yet its 'inclusive' terminology, such as 'sisters and brothers', now seems dated, and even quite exclusionary to some non-binary and other gender diverse people. We require substantial new steps: raising up gender diverse voices, and being actively intentional in education, awareness, resourcing and legal and institutional change.

As a white person I have significant privileges compared to many of my queer siblings. For race, culture and economics are very significant and further deeply complicate the simplistic normative political and religious binaries. The location of power is indicative. It is thus hardly surprising that two of transgender people's best political allies have been Senators Louise Pratt and Janet Rice, both of whom have been married to gender diverse people. Whilst some progress has been made, key queer people of colour also still experience a 'white gay-tocracy' as overly dominant in queer organisations. Further complications occur when faith is added to the mixture.

Caught between several dominant binaries, gender diverse people of faith are certainly not helped by the gross simplification and extraordinary lack of nuance in public understanding of faith – including among politicians and, sadly, in many faith spaces. It is not just the rise to public prominence of certain religious constructions – typically crude, externalist, institutional, reductionist and propositional, founded on unquestioned and simply unverifiable bases. It is that these are seen as 'orthodox' rather than the long, ambiguous, history of complex, holistic, multi-layered, dynamic and experiential, culturally varied, changing and practice-based expressions of faith. This development is fed by the continuing colonial settlement of religion on essentially Enlightenment terms: framing faith as something private and belonging to distinct identity groups, rather than as differing elements in the common good: and leading to confusion between a healthy 'secular' society, valuing diverse faith and other contributors, and a secularistic dynamic which seeks to relegate or even exclude faith diversity in order to exalt 'liberal' values. Manifest in the

lack of genuinely open, well-resourced, religious public education, this provides a fruitful breeding ground for politics and religions which wedge and weaponise faith and identity. Within the LGBTIQ+ community, alongside understandable pain, this then further aids 'faith-phobic' features.

What then of 'queer futures' for those 'walking between worlds' as we try to climb out from under the 'bus'? Let me offer four trajectories. The first trajectory is well advanced. This is the neo-fundamentalist sectarian pathway, which involves significant hardening of boundaries, focused on certain, quite recent. Western ideas of the body, God and Creation. This is increasingly politicised, abetted by the political Right, and vice-versa. In Anglican circles, it is seen notably in GAFCON (the so-called Global Anglican Future Conference): itself an unholy alliance between reactionary Westerners seeking to shore up their existing power, and conservatives from poorer countries, seeking futures beyond white colonialism, yet carrying old missionary prejudices.

The second trajectory is queer faith growth, even in surprising spaces. We are not simply queer, but 'here, there and everywhere', and we will continue to emerge. Though they will not yet admit it, existing faith traditions also badly need us. They are powerless to transform themselves and until they receive our gifts, and those of others they have denied, they will have no real future. However the existential question for queer people of faith is at what cost and with what support will we continue to grow? Speaking personally, even as a privileged white queer faith leader, the pathway is hard. Not for nothing are we exhausted, see colleagues burnt out, and frequently question our own participation in organised faith spaces. When, we ask, will even some of our genuinely well-meaning allies really take us seriously, promote education and awareness, and give us resources? There is no excuse. This year my wife and I created and taught what we understand is the first accredited Queer Theology unit in an Australian university. Yet it is not really a cause

for celebration. For it comes after decades of now well established but neglected queer theologies across the world.

Thirdly, queer faith futures are bound up with unfolding challenges to wider secular society, and, not least, to the dominant secularistic LGBTIQ+ community and its leadership. How well and quickly will they respond to necessary shifts in ways of working with queer people of faith? There have been welcome signs, for example in the way Equality Australia has worked with some of us. Next year will also see a breakthrough, with the first ever World Pride plenary session dedicated to faith concerns at the Human Rights Conference. Yet in the queer community there is still too much knee-jerk opposition to, and lack of real understanding of, people of faith. This feeds the Right's wedging and weaponising. It also risks missing current political opportunities, where rights' debates might move beyond binary oppositions to how we might live, with creative tensions, beyond them. This is more demanding, but, crucially recognises how faith, and various other identities – sex, gender, race, culture – intersect and are embodied in the particularities of our diverse human lives and bodies.

This brings us back to the challenges of Intersectionality, my fourth trajectory. For real tensions exists. They are posed, for example, in the Uniting Church, by how First Nations and Queer people can work in more healthier ways together. They are posed in the Anglican Communion, by the challenges, highlighted by GAFCON, between colonialist mindsets, money and power, and progressive interests. They are posed in the Church of Rome by an even more complex clash of cultures, and tensions between rising justice calls from the Global South and the desire for order.

The 'high priest' of 'gender theory', Judith Butler has recently helpfully outlined how and why gender diverse people are now at the centre of debate, even though we still lack real voice, agency

and resources. As she observes,¹ opponents are actually very inconsistent and often rationally incoherent. They also construct the very 'gender ideology' it opposes, since anyone with a modicum of real interest knows that gender studies and, still more gender diverse experience, defy simple categorisation. We therefore need to face up to their real aim, and profound threat, not only to gender diverse people, but to all minorities. As Judith rightly puts it:

For this reactionary movement, the term "gender" attracts, condenses, and electrifies a diverse set of social and economic anxieties produced by increasing economic precarity under neoliberal regimes, intensifying social inequality, and pandemic shutdown. Stoked by fears of infrastructural collapse, anti-migrant anger and... the fear of losing the sanctity of the heteronormative family, national identity and white supremacy, many insist that the destructive forces of gender, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory are to blame. When gender is thus figured as a foreign invasion, these groups clearly reveal that they are in the business of nation-building. The nation for which they are fighting is built upon white supremacy, the heteronormative family, and a resistance to all critical questioning of norms that have clearly restricted the freedoms and imperilled the lives of so many people.

Gender, thereby:

comes to stand for, or is linked with, all kinds of imagined "infiltrations" of the national body... Thus "gender" becomes a phantom, sometimes specified as the "devil" itself, a pure force of destruction threatening God's creation.

The anti-gender diversity movement is hence a threat to all that is life-giving in so much of this land we now call Australia. Helping gender diverse people out from under the bus is therefore not only a necessary positive step. Assisting us claim the front seat with other minorities, and sharing the driving seat, may be even more vital. For faith, politics and gender diversity are inextricably linked. To echo Judith Butler, 'the time for intersectional solidarity is now.'

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash>