

Opinion

What the Same-Sex Marriage Debate Is - and Is Not - About

Archbishop Mark Coleridge ABC Religion and Ethics 14 Jul 2015

Australian-born Margaret Somerville is Professor of Law at McGill University in Canada and a world-renowned ethicist. In [Sydney recently](#), she said that "euthanasia is not an incremental change to current end-of-life practices but a radical and massive shift in our society's and civilisation's foundational values."

Her words could be adapted to same sex-marriage, which is not "an incremental change" or natural evolution of the institution of marriage, but "a radical and massive shift" in the values upon which marriage has been founded and which it has sought to embody.

If that is so, then any decision with regard to same-sex marriage should be based on truth rather than falsehood, lest we end up building on sand. Yet the ideology underpinning the push for same-sex marriage contains a number of falsehoods, which are at times presented as self-evidently true but which are not.

Let me name some of them here as a service to truth in this complex and important matter.

Same-sex marriage is about equality

It is true that all human beings are equal. But this does not mean they are the same. Same-sex marriage ideology implies that equality means sameness. It does not. I may be different, but I am still equal. Marriage policy in any polity has "discriminated" against certain people: parents cannot marry their children, brother and sister cannot marry, those under age cannot marry. Nor can people of the same sex. That does not make them any less equal.

It is 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, but that does not mean that they are or could become marriage.

It is about civil rights

Here the link is made to women's rights and racial equality. But the law already offers ample protection to same-sex attracted people in a relationship in a way that was not true of women or people of other races in earlier times. Are same-sex attracted people excluded from voting, entering shops or using public transport? Justice can be done to same-sex attracted people and their human dignity can be respected *without* resort to an artificially constructed "right" to marry.

Heterosexuality and homosexuality are 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.

Children are an optional extra in marriage

Without resort to extraordinary measures, same-sex couples cannot produce children. Yet bringing children to birth and raising them in a stable environment is fundamental to marriage, which remains true even if a married couple cannot conceive. The two purposes of marriage are unitive and procreative. They are deeply interrelated. Yet same-sex marriage separates them radically, which means that it cannot really be marriage.

Marriage is 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. This is why it is important to speak of the common good when speaking of marriage; it is also why same-sex marriage ideology focuses on putative individual rights rather than the common good.

Gender and the body are not decisive

Same-sex marriage ideology says that gender difference is a social construct and that it does not matter for marriage. It also says that the body, or biology, is of no final relevance. 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 whatever they will.

Humanity has 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 is a particular arrogance to claim that all cultures through millennia 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 evoke Henry Ford's unwise maxim, "History is bunk."

The non-Western world will eventually catch up with the West

Non-Western cultures are often perplexed by the push for same-sex marriage in the West, but this is not necessarily a sign that they are backward or less civilised - even though the West tends to think that the rest of the world, if it is not 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 but have been abandoned.

Those who do not favour same-sex marriage are homophobic and bigoted

It is possible to oppose same-sex marriage - and the ideology which underpins it - 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 ideology are denigrated in an attempt to discredit or silence them. There is a violence in this, which is resistant to the truthful debate we need.

Another well-known Australian, former politician [Graham Richardson](#) claimed recently in an opinion piece that truth counts for little in Australian politics. Regrettably, 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 is why the ideology underpinning the push for same-sex marriage is an unreliable basis for a decision which is much more than political. This debate is about the meaning of marriage.

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