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# Evangelical Quarterly

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# Sex, truth and tolerance: some theological reflections on the Irish Civil Partnership Bill 2010 and challenges facing Christians in a post-Christendom culture

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## Introduction

In November 2009 the Evangelical Alliance Ireland (EAI) published a response to the Irish Government's impending Civil Partnership Bill [CPB] that, amongst other things, created the category of Civil Partnership and associated legal rights for same-sex couples.<sup>1</sup> The statement surprised some people because EAI did not oppose the Bill but advised evangelical Christians to accept its general thrust.<sup>2</sup> This stance departed from statements on similar legislation made by the Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom,<sup>3</sup> was disowned by some fellow Irish evangelicals and stood in sharp contrast with the position of the Irish Roman Catholic Church and other religious organisations.

While I was involved in the advisory group that helped draft the EAI statement, this purpose of this paper is not apologetic. Rather, using the CPB, and differing responses to it, as a lens, I want to focus on some of the challenges that

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- 1 The Bill was eventually signed into law in on 17 July 2010. A copy of final approved Bill can be found at 'Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Bill 2009', <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/bills/2009/4409/b44b09d.pdf>. (Accessed 13 August, 2010).
  - 2 For the original statement see 'Evangelical Christians and the Civil Partnership Bill 2009' (Evangelical Alliance Ireland, 2009), <http://www.evangelical.ie/docs/Civil%20Partnership%20response.pdf>. (Accessed 20 September, 2010).
  - 3 Responding to the UK Civil Partnership Bill, now the Civil Partnership Act 2004, Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) and the Evangelical Alliance outlined their concerns stating that they regarded it as constituting 'gay marriage in all but name'. They preference was 'for adopting the new rights on a case by case basis making use of existing legislation.' 'Content of Civil Marriage Ceremonies: A Consultation response on proposed changes to regulation and guidance to registration offices', 2005, <http://www.eauk.org/public-affairs/marriageandfamily/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=3357>. (Accessed 14 September, 2010).

the Bill raises in terms of Christian engagement with faith and public square issues within a wider western European 'post-Christendom' culture. By 'post-Christendom' I mean that the socio-political consensus that placed Christianity at the controlling centre of social, political, and religious affairs, is fast evaporating. Contemporary Ireland, as with most of Western Europe, is moving from a Christendom mode to a post-Christendom mode.<sup>4</sup>

It is a premise of this paper that the question of how Christians are to engage in public theology can only be discussed meaningfully within the narrative of their own culture and so what follows is a strongly contextualised discussion around a specific piece of legislation. It does not pretend to be an argument for a normative response by evangelicals to same-sex legislation. It does hope to make a contribution to a wider conversation among evangelicals in very different contexts of questions surrounding faith in the public square.

Given the importance of context, Part 1 of this paper will briefly discuss the specific Irish background to the CPB. Part 2 will outline some foundational theological principles for Christian civic engagement and discuss two popular competing forms of Christian public theology. In light of this, Part 3 will describe a 'Christian Realist' position and argue that this theological framework lay behind the EAI statement. Part 4 is a concluding section reflecting on some challenges posed to Christians in general by an increasingly post-Christendom West.

## 1. The Irish Context

One legacy of 'Christendom Ireland' has been deep and lasting damage to the Catholic Church and to the victims of authoritarian religion. The political and religious storm evoked by the shocking findings of the Murphy Report in November 2009 into sex-abuse within the Dublin diocese and the associated cover-up by the Irish hierarchy, only further cemented already well-formed attitudes.<sup>5</sup>

Christians in post-Christendom Ireland cannot avoid having to do business with this baleful legacy. Such has been the horror associated with a church exercising freely given and virtually unlimited, religious, social and political power, that many people in modern Ireland are convinced that 'religion is bad for you' and are determined to construct a society free from its negative influence.<sup>6</sup> This

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4 For a sociological description of the unravelling of Christendom in Ireland, the best book is still Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998).

5 See 'Commission of Investigation, Dublin Archdiocese, Catholic Diocese of Cloyne', <http://www.dacoi.ie/>. (Accessed 13 September, 2010). This report followed damning inquiries such as that of the Ryan Commission of May 2009 investigating child abuse within state institutions and the Ferns Report of 2005 into abuse by clergy within the diocese of Ferns, Co. Wicklow.

6 For a passionate defence of the CPB and how it represents progress towards a fairer more equal society see this article and associated comments in the *Irish Times* on 30 June, 2010 by Angela Kerins, chairwoman of the Equality Authority in Ireland, 'Partnership is a civil entity not a religious one', <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2010/0630/1224273621652.html>. (Accessed 30 November, 2010).

impulse strongly resonates with emphases within the Western secular liberal democratic project, as for example articulated by John Rawls who argued that the public square should form an ‘overlapping consensus’ consisting only of ‘reasonable’ points of view (rather than ‘comprehensive doctrines’ such as religious beliefs) that could be accepted as such by all participating groups.<sup>7</sup>

In such a context, evangelicals and other Christians will need to engage with liberalism’s ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ regarding religion. Political liberalism does not so much deny the truth of religious belief, but operates out of a rejection that any one faith position be given a dominant role. In this sense, liberalism seeks to constrain religion out of a fear of its totalising tendencies and subsequent limitation of individual freedom. Recent Irish history, and the sadly chequered history of Christianity itself, gives real weight to these fears. While Christendom was by no means wholly negative, too often the church ‘prostituted itself to Caesar... advancing its own agenda by a combination of flattery and battery – flattery towards the emperor and battery against heretics and dissidents.’<sup>8</sup> With the demise of Christendom, the plausibility of religion in the public square has fast been eroded and now, as Marshall puts it, religion and theology are ‘viewed as a trivial, if not malign, influence in political life and are largely ignored in political deliberation. It is no longer accepted that Christian theology trades in public truth; it simply articulates the beliefs of a minority of “cognitive deviants” in the population.’<sup>9</sup>

While it is debatable if this is yet true of Ireland, the drift is certainly in that direction. Any Christian socio-political engagement will therefore need to be marked by humility, civility and openness to genuine dialogue if it is not to be dismissed as an attempt to ‘roll back the clock’ and impose Christian morality by power.

In sum, the shaping assumptions of a post-Christendom liberal secular democracy include a commitment to values which are optimistically understood as providing a path towards a *healthier, fairer and more advanced society* than that of the past. They include:

- *Pluralism*: where the reality of the plurality of cultures, religions, and beliefs within modern societies makes it a necessity for the state to accommodate all and privilege none. Political liberalism seeks to achieve this by making the state ‘neutral’ in terms of religious preference and therefore, in effect, intentionally non-religious.
- *Tolerance*: where all beliefs and behaviours within the law should be tolerated.
- *Individual choice and human rights*: Of critical importance here is the liberal belief (one could say ‘faith’) that human freedom of choice is an

7 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Of course, who determines what view is ‘reasonable’ or not is the crux of the matter.

8 Colin Marshall, ‘What Language Shall I Borrow?; The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology’, *Evangel* 24, no. 2 (2006): 45-52. See 47.

9 *Ibid.*, 47-48.

ultimate right and that human beings are the sole measure of all things. Closely connected to this belief is an implicit modernist assumption of progress. Namely, that since individual choice is 'a good thing', the more individual freedom any society has, the better or freer or more advanced that society will become.

- *Increasing separation of church and state*: in the sense of dismantling the legacy of Christendom where churches had central and controlling positions
- *Equality*: where by law citizens must all be treated equally regardless of their beliefs or lifestyles.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Civil Partnership Bill as a symptom of post-Christendom*

This context makes it clear how the Civil Partnership Bill is just one symptom of the rapid unravelling of Christendom Ireland. It is remarkable just how unremarkable this legislation is within a culture that outlawed homosexuality until 1993 and wholeheartedly embraced Catholic moral teaching for most of the twentieth century through extensive legislation.<sup>11</sup> Supported by every political party in the Dáil,<sup>12</sup> the Bill is a typical example of secularism whereby it is the state's role to promote equality of treatment for all citizens. In other words, the state sees itself as having no business interfering in individuals' private lives. While Civil Partnership is not marriage, the thrust of the Bill is to treat married and same-sex couples in an equal manner within the limits of the Irish Constitution. The corollary is that marriage is simply treated as a lifestyle choice and it is not the function of the state to promote it as a better option than co-habitation or same-sex civil union. In other words, in stark contrast to the past, this Bill is an example of the state attempting to extricate itself from the realm of moral and ethical values.

## 2. Evangelicals and public theology

### *The universal scope of Christian theology*

Public theology has been defined as 'the attempt to address matters of common or public concern in the community in light of the special truth claims and insights of Christian belief'.<sup>13</sup> It therefore seeks to engage in dialogue with policy makers and public institutions to make a constructive contribution towards the building of a better society but does so by offering a distinct voice, shaped by the

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10 The most relevant legislation in Ireland is the 2000-2004 Equal Status Act.

11 See John Henry Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1970* 2nd Ed. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1980).

12 The Irish Parliament.

13 Marshall, 'What Language Shall I Borrow?', 45.

overarching gospel narrative on which Christianity rests.<sup>14</sup> Christianity resists the popular modern assumption that there should be a split between the realms of 'private faith' and a secular public square because the content of the gospel story is universal in scope and therefore, in a very real sense, all Christian theology is public theology. There is no distinction between 'public' and 'private' worlds if Jesus Christ is Lord over creation and its destiny lies in his hands. It is in this sense that Newbigin talked about the gospel as 'Public Truth',<sup>15</sup> it is not just about 'saving souls' but tells the unfolding story of the God's redemptive purposes for all of creation. The kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching is the 'breaking in' of God's rule into the present<sup>16</sup> and acts as a sign of the future reality to come when all of God's purposes will be fulfilled in a new heavens and a new earth.<sup>17</sup> If this is the case, while any authentically Christian theology will include an emphasis on the necessity of personal faith, it will also issue in a deep concern for matters of public life and the wellbeing of human society.<sup>18</sup> It follows that a prime calling of the church is to speak prophetically and work sacrificially for the renewal and reform of society across a wide range of public issues.

Christian public theology also has a dual nature well captured in Miroslav Volf's notion of 'distance and belonging'.<sup>19</sup> On one hand, in a liberal democracy no-one should need to defend their right to free speech or right to engage in public debate. In this sense, Christians should be able to affirm and welcome pluralism 'because it ensures or makes more likely certain goods which would otherwise not be realized.'<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Christians find their true citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20-21). Note the eschatological framework for Paul's ethics here. A superior spiritual 'belonging' to the Lord Jesus Christ, who will

14 For further discussion of evangelicals and public theology see Daniel Strange, 'Evangelical Public Theology: What on Earth? Why on Earth? How on Earth?' in Chris Green (ed.) *A Higher throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology*, (Nottingham: IVP, 2008).

15 Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

16 Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 70-119.

17 This discussion is obviously hugely compressed. There has been an outpouring of thinking about the relationship between the kingdom of God and social ethics within global evangelicalism. See for example Al Tizon, *Transformation After Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-local Perspective* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2008).

18 For a helpful reflection on the role of the Christian in calling the state to live up to its God-given task to promote justice and serve the common good, see in Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers, *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

19 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

20 Paul Helm, 'Christianity and Politics in a Plural Society: An Augustinian Approach', in Stephen Clark (ed.) *Tales of Two Cities: Christianity and Politics* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 184-209. See 189.

bring *everything* under his control, radically relativises ‘belonging’ to any earthly form of citizenship. The gospel is the message that this Jesus, a first century Palestinian Jew executed by the state, has been raised from the dead and been declared by God to be the risen Lord who holds the future of all things in his hands. The universal scope of this future orientated narrative means that Christians are called to exercise ‘distance’ from any transient source of political identity. When inevitable conflict arises there is no question as to who the Christian owes absolute loyalty. As N. T. Wright is fond of saying, ‘If Jesus is Lord then Caesar is not’.<sup>21</sup> O’Donovan captures this tension well,

The church will frame its political witness with authenticity, avoiding the characteristic evils of abstract idealism and colourless assimilation, when it stands self-consciously before that horizon and confesses that it looks for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.<sup>22</sup>

The implications of this are significant. A Christian belongs to Jesus Christ and is called to participate in his kingdom agenda of the redemption of the whole created order. This gospel metanarrative stands in stark opposition to that of liberal secularism. The ‘good news’ of the latter is the optimistic modernist story of continual human progress guided by human reason alone. Like a mirror image of Christendom, secularism depends on the ‘faith’ that its rational convictions are universally ‘true’ and therefore confidently seeks to apply these beliefs to everyone through its own set of associated legislation – of which the Civil Partnership Bill is just one an example. In these post-modern times, Christians are not the only ones pointing out that this is just as much a ‘faith stance’ as any religion.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, while belonging to and participating constructively to the renewal of their own culture, Christians will simultaneously be ‘dissenters’ from a secularist understanding of that culture that attempts to exclude the Lordship of Jesus over all cultures.<sup>24</sup> What *form* this dual mandate should take is the issue to which we now turn.

### 3. Different perspectives on faith in the public square

There have, of course, been many Christian responses to the challenge of being

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21 N. T. Wright, ‘The New Testament and the State’, *Themelios* 16, no. 1 (1990): 11-17. See 14. For further discussion of the radical political implications of Philippians 3:20-21 see Paul Trebilco, ‘Gospel, Culture, and the public sphere: Perspectives from the New Testament’, *Evangel* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 37-45.

22 Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 288.

23 Lyotard’s famous remark in 1979 defining postmodernism as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (whether religious or not) that use the ‘Phantom reason’ to legitimate themselves comes to mind here.

24 Helm, ‘Christianity and Politics’, 190-92.

‘in the world but not of it’.<sup>25</sup> All I can hope to do here is describe, with specific examples from the Irish debate where relevant, two opposite tendencies and argue for an alternative approach. In doing so I am engaging in particular with the recent work of Canadian theologian John Stackhouse who talks about ‘cultural transformation’ versus ‘holy distinctness’ positions and argues, building on the work of Reinhold Niebhuur, C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for a ‘Christian realist’ view.<sup>26</sup>

### *Pursuing cultural transformation*

According to Stackhouse, ‘cultural transformers’ tend to prioritise being ‘in the world’ and tend to have a ‘take it over’ approach. In other words, it is *the pursuit of the goal of shaping society according to Christian values*. This policy, successfully implemented, logically leads towards what Paul Helm negatively describes as ‘Christian uniformitarianism’.<sup>27</sup> Various forms of this tendency exist in the American religious right as well as in nuanced versions of neo-Calvinism – what Stackhouse calls the ‘world formative’ or ‘transformational’ agenda descending from the nineteenth century traditions of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavink. But ‘cultural transformers’ are not limited to Protestantism. Conservative Roman Catholicism also seeks to shape culture according to the values of Catholic moral theology – and there were few places where both church and state enthusiastically participated in this vision than in independent Ireland. Stackhouse includes famous figures like the late Richard John Neuhaus and Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI as ‘articulating a Catholic agenda of pervading and ultimately dominating culture – with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit’.<sup>28</sup> Also included in this camp are the liberation theologies of people like Gustavo Gutiérrez which espouse their own radical forms of social transformation.

I will now briefly sketch three negative responses to the CPB; two from within the Roman Catholic tradition and one from a Reformed perspective. Obvious differences of emphasis and approach will be evident, but all of these I propose, in some form or other, are culturally transformationalist in that they are seeking to shape society according to Christian values.

#### *i. The Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference*

In response to the approaching Dáil debate on the CPB, the Irish Catholic Bish-

25 For detailed historical, political and theological reflection on these issues in a UK context see Evangelical Alliance UK, *Faith and Nation: Report of a Commission of Inquiry to the UK Evangelical Alliance* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2006).

26 John Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

27 Helm, ‘Christianity and Politics’, 188.

28 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*. 5-6. While a marginal point, it does seem Stackhouse is unfair on Neuhaus here. His brilliant contribution to public theology is hardly best described as one of seeking domination.

ops' Conference published a leaflet on marriage and the CPB.<sup>29</sup> It articulated, as one might expect, a traditional Catholic cultural transformationalist case for opposing the Bill. The CPB's virtual equating of civil partnership with marriage undermines marriage itself by implying that the state has no vested interest in whether people marry or not, rather than being 'fundamental to the very existence and wellbeing of society as a whole.'<sup>30</sup> It neglects the constitutional role of the Irish state to 'guard with special care' the institution of marriage.<sup>31</sup> It prepares the way for same-sex partnerships to be called marriage. It is unjust in that it deprives children their right to both a mother and a father. It discriminates against other forms of non-sexual yet dependent partnership (elderly siblings for example) by privileging those in a sexual relationship. It threatens the religious freedom of individuals from various religious traditions who might not want to participate in a civil partnership ceremony through commercial or public service involvement.

### ii. *The Iona Institute*

The Iona Institute exists to promote 'the place of marriage and religion in society.'<sup>32</sup> While not explicitly stated, it is clearly a Catholic organisation reflecting Catholic moral values.<sup>33</sup> It is likely that its aims are shaped by a Catholic understanding of natural law – that certain rights or values can be apprehended by human reason and have universal validity by virtue of the fact that this is the way God has created things to be.<sup>34</sup> This sort of framework tends to lead in a Christendom direction.

At least four documents have been published by Iona on the CPB. What follows is a summary of their main arguments.<sup>35</sup>

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29 Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'Why Marriage Matters: a statement of the Irish Bishops' Conference on the Civil Partnership Bill', March 10, 2010, [http://www.catholicbishops.ie/images/stories/features/Marriage\\_Matters/why\\_marriage\\_matters\\_eng.pdf](http://www.catholicbishops.ie/images/stories/features/Marriage_Matters/why_marriage_matters_eng.pdf). (Accessed 23 August, 2010).

30 *Ibid.*, 3.

31 Article 41.3.1 of the Irish Constitution.

32 See <http://www.ionainstitute.com/index.php?id=1> (Accessed 1 March, 2010). Other related aims are to 'defend the continued existence of publicly-funded denominational schools' and to 'promote freedom of conscience and religion.'

33 Patrons include Fergus O'Donoghue SJ, editor of *Studies* (a quarterly journal published by the Irish Jesuits) and Vincent Twomey a member of the Divine Word Missionaries and retired Professor of Moral Theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth. See <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/index.php?id=80>

34 Irish Bishops' Conference, 'Notification on Recent Developments in Moral Theology and their Implications for the Church and Society', July 2004. <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/images/docs/moraltheologyjuly2004.pdf>.

35 Three briefing papers are available online: 'Gay Civil Unions and Family Policy: what's at stake?', <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/assets/files/Civil%20unions%20An%20overview.pdf>; 'Same-Sex Civil Unions and Religious Freedom', <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/assets/files/Civil%20unions%20religious%20freedom%20cases.pdf>;

- a. The state should support a 'pro-marriage view' since the family based on marriage tends to produce better results for its members than other family forms.
- b. The State should not see marriage as a realm for equal rights legislation but should rather prioritise the well-being of the child. Research shows children generally do best in a family with one mother and one father.
- c. A comprehensive freedom of conscience and religion clause should protect both religious believers and organisations against legal action.<sup>36</sup>
- d. There is no need to extend rights similar to marriage to same-sex couples. Legal rights and protections can be extended to same-sex couples, as well as to anyone involved in a caring, dependent relationship, whether sexual or not. Such 'Domestic Partnership' rights could include, for example, next-of kin rights, property settlement rights and maintenance rights.

It is noteworthy that no arguments are made on moral, theological or biblical grounds in the Iona Institute papers. Indeed, it is striking that the Institute rejects the use of religious motives for supporting marriage since they 'would be very difficult to sustain in a pluralist society where many people do not subscribe to Christian or other religious tenets and have a different moral view of marriage in any case.'<sup>37</sup>

In light of this, Iona's central argument for opposing the CPB is a pragmatic one; marriage works better for children and therefore there is a 'rational reason for both the State and society to go on favouring marriage, while assisting all families in need... State and society have a duty to objectively assess which family forms produce the best outcomes for children.'<sup>38</sup>

### *iii. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland*

A third example of a response from a Reformed perspective is that of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI). As its name suggests, the church straddles the UK-Irish border and had responded to similar 2005 Civil Partnership legislation in the UK.<sup>39</sup> This policy was explicitly reapplied to the Irish Government's pro-

'How the Civil Partnership Bill will affect Freedom of Conscience and Religion', <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/assets/files/Civil%20partnership%20freedom%20of%20religion.pdf>.

The detailed position paper is 'Domestic Partnerships: a response to recent proposals on civil unions', <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/assets/files/civilunionweb.pdf>. (All accessed 1 March, 2010).

36 A specific example here is of Lillian Ladele, a Christian Registrar who was suspended from work in the UK for declining to facilitate a same-sex civil partnership. In the Irish legislation the Registrar could theoretically be found guilty of an offence and fined up to €2000 and/or six months in prison.

37 Iona Institute, 'Domestic Partnerships', 10.

38 *Ibid.*, 10.

39 The first Civil Partnership ceremony in the UK took place in Belfast in December 2005.

posals<sup>40</sup> and made similar points to other cultural transformationalist perspectives, namely:

- a. Issues of inheritance and tax for those ‘who choose to live in a way that does not follow the Christian teaching we espouse’ should be resolved, but Civil Partnership is not the answer.
- b. Civil Partnership legislation will ‘lead to the degrading of marriage in our society which we believe to a God-given institution for the well ordering and well being of human relationships’ ... ‘which will be in the interests of none of us.’
- c. A resolution of the 2006 General Assembly of the Church urged the ‘Irish Government to ... refrain from any legislation’ that would weaken marriage.<sup>41</sup> In 2008, the Church further urged the government to resist pressure from ‘the Gay/Lesbian lobby’ or the European Parliament to introduce ‘legal recognition of same-sex partnerships as “gay marriages” on fully equal terms.’<sup>42</sup>

### *Pursuing ‘holy distinctness’*

An opposite stance to cultural transformation is what Stackhouse labels as ‘refuse all entanglements’. It leads to a vision of ‘holy distinctness, of a definite Christian community living in contradistinction to the rest of society and thus offering the beneficial example and influence of an alternative way of life.’<sup>43</sup> As with the cultural transformers, this tendency includes a diverse range of theologies and movements that simultaneously disagree with each other at many points. Stackhouse includes the ‘burgeoning but self-consciously marginal’ forms of Pentecostalism and older Anabaptist communities like the Mennonites, Hutterites and Amish. The Anabaptist tradition finds its most eloquent voices in the writings of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas.

‘Holy distinctness’ advocates criticise cultural transformers as pursuing a vision that is both *unrealistic* and *undesirable*. It is unrealistic in that the cultural tide that swept the church into power and created over a millennium of Christendom culture in the West is fast receding.<sup>44</sup> If Christians imagine that it can be stopped or reversed, they will be disappointed. It is undesirable in that, while it is certainly a gross simplification to say that everything to do with Christendom

40 ‘Two years on, facing similar questions in this jurisdiction, the position of our Church remains the same.’ ‘Church and Society Submission to the Working Group on Domestic Partnership Established by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform’, *General Assembly Minutes* 2006, 48.

41 ‘Resolutions agreed by the General Assembly’, *General Assembly Minutes*, 2006, 50.

42 ‘Church and Society Committee Report’ in *General Assembly Annual Reports*, 2008, 32.

43 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 6.

44 For a condensed yet pithy discussion of this cultural shift and its impact on churches in North America see Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997).

since Constantine was a disaster, untold damage has been done to the authenticity of the church's witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ by boundaries between church and state becoming blurred. A glance at the imperfections and limits of previous supposedly 'Christian cultures' (of whatever hue) should warn against the delusion that 'we' will somehow be exempt from the corrupting influences of power.<sup>45</sup> The religious history of Ireland already alluded to bears grim testimony to this reality. Christendom itself was not the 'goal' but a by-product of the early church's authenticity in being the people of God in the face of frequent persecution and marginalisation. Whenever Christians imagine that they can achieve spiritual advance by fighting to 'hold on to' or impose Christendom values, they risk associating the gospel with power and being drawn into a subsequent 'culture war'.<sup>46</sup> They also risk, as Drew points out, missing the *locus* of cultural change in that it is questionable whether public policy is really 'where it is at'.<sup>47</sup> The issue here is that cultural transformers tend to invest an extraordinary amount of confidence in politics as source of societal renewal. This assumption has been heavily critiqued in a recent major book by James Davison Hunter. Cultural change is a highly complex process that cannot be 'willed into being' from the 'bottom up' through spiritual transformation of individuals or controlled by winning occasional battles over legislation as many Christians seem to believe.<sup>48</sup>

Returning to the Irish context, here is one example of a negative 'holy distinctness' response to the Civil Partnership Bill

#### *Aontas*

Aontas describe themselves as a 'partnership of Bible-centred Churches, organisations and individuals who have come together to co-operate in advancing the Gospel of Christ in Ireland.'<sup>49</sup> While they share an uncompromising opposition to the CPB with the cultural transformationalist perspectives described above, and do not articulate any clear Anabaptist theology, a strongly pietistic attitude suggests that they are best located within a 'refuse all entanglements' approach to culture.

A public statement, 'The Civil Partnership Bill and the Christian', was issued rebutting EAI's stance as 'unbiblical', unrepresentative of evangelicalism in Ireland and beyond, and a 'disservice to the Gospel' in that it lends support to

45 Helm, 'Christianity and Politics', 187; Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 324-25.

46 James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

47 Gavin Drew, 'The Gospel as Public Truth in a Pluralistic World: a reflection on Lesslie Newbigin's Thought', *Evangel* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 53-61. See 55.

48 Hunter, *To Change the World*. For more detailed criticism of the political strategies of both the American Christian Right and Left, see 111-149. For Hunter's eleven propositions on culture and how cultural change occurs, see 32-47.

49 <http://www.aontas.ie/>. (Accessed 14 August, 2010). Aontas is Irish for 'union'.

'sinful practices clearly condemned in Scripture'.<sup>50</sup> The statement as a whole is internally focused within the world of Irish evangelicalism; marking out boundaries of what is and what is not an authentic evangelical response to the CPB with little attempt to engage with a wider audience.

'Holy distinctness' themes are clear in Aontas' self-understanding as a 'prophetic voice' to 'a relativistic age', declaring 'in this present darkness the unchanging will of God.' The statement displays little expectation that fallen Irish culture can be transformed according to Christian values, acknowledging that 'Christian opposition to the Bill will most likely not succeed in stopping this measure being adopted by the Dáil.' Nor does it propose 'that the Government should seek to impose our views on anyone.'

The main aim appears to be simply to fulfil a 'moral duty to declare the Truth' and 'not fail in our duty to be salt and light.' This task 'may take courage but this world needs courageous men and woman of faith' called to 'declare the will of God as found in Scripture'. In contrast to an agenda of cultural transformation, the Aontas statement reflects a 'holy withdrawal' attitude to the world.

### *A third way? Christian realism, EAI and the Civil Partnership Bill*

At this point the reader may be expecting a grand unveiling of an alternative third way from both 'cultural transformationalist' or 'holy distinctness' options. However, this is not what a 'Christian realist' view advocates. It acknowledges that both approaches have significant biblical support and notable strengths, as well as weaknesses. Both have a long legacy within Christian thought and, while imperfect, both seek to embody authentic Christian discipleship for the good of the church and the world.

In other words, Christian realism rejects a pre-packaged theological grid of either cultural transformation or of holy distinctness in favour of a contextualised response to specific ethical and political situations.<sup>51</sup> Rather than solely pursue 'the' right approach to culture, it is unashamedly pragmatic in seeking to *maximise shalom* in the messy reality of a diverse and complex post-Christendom culture.<sup>52</sup>

It is this attempt to engage with at least four political, cultural and spiritual realities of the contemporary Irish context that characterises the EAI statement.

50 Aontas, 'Civil Partnership and the Christian', emailed public statement, 18 March, 2010.

51 Stackhouse analyses how C. S. Lewis, Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer all offer ideas and examples helpful towards the articulation and practice of 'a realistic Christian mode of engagement' with modern culture. Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 44.

52 In a book published almost at the same time as that of Stackhouse, Carson also concludes that Christians need apply a robust biblical theology to issues of Christ and culture rather than 'inflexible grids that are often made to stand in the Bible's place.' D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008).

In saying this I am not concluding that EAI ‘got it right’ – that is up to each reader to decide.

*i. Realism about the nature of a plural society*

The CPB is an attempt by the Irish Government to legislate for the reality of that co-habiting couples are the fast growing family type in Ireland. There were over 120,000 co-habiting couples recorded in the 2006 census representing 11.6% of the population. In 2008, 33% of all births in the state were to unmarried parents (either single or living together).<sup>53</sup> One fifth of households in Dublin are traditional families of married parents with children.<sup>54</sup> The number of same sex cohabiting couples recorded in the 2006 census was 2,090 compared with 1,300 in 2002. Two thirds of these were male couples.<sup>55</sup>

The legislation does not redefine the Irish Constitution’s definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, to do so would require a constitutional referendum. EAI clearly took the view that, on balance, the CPB was a reasonable attempt to deal fairly with these facts.

The Government is seeking to legislate for greater justice and fairness for co-habiting couples, both same-sex and opposite-sex couples. As Christians we should support that stance. Co-habiting couples are a reality – this legislation seeks to deal with that reality from a legal perspective.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, the statement is willing not only to live with difference but to support the construction of a plural society where difference is tolerated. Commenting informally on the EAI statement, Baptist theologian Steve Holmes wrote ‘we have demanded too often that the law be brought into accord with our moral intuitions, without exception or reserve. Evangelicals have probably been worse at this than most.’ Yet, he continues, ‘The intuition... that it is the moral duty of government to maintain a studied neutrality on certain matters, and to offer space and protection for its people to live in the way that they might choose, is a natively evangelical one.’<sup>57</sup>

Earlier in this paper I outlined the shaping assumptions of western liberal secular democracy that characterise our contemporary political discourse. A strong case can be made that this sort of liberal democracy has roots in Christian

53 CSO, ‘Vital Statistics: Fourth Quarter and Yearly Summary 2008’ (Stationary Office, Dublin, 2008), [http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/vitalstats/2008/vstats\\_q42008.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/vitalstats/2008/vstats_q42008.pdf). (Accessed 20 September 2010).

54 ‘CSO: News and Events: Press Releases 2007: Census 2006 Volume 3’, [http://www.cso.ie/newsevents/pr\\_census2006vol3.htm](http://www.cso.ie/newsevents/pr_census2006vol3.htm). (Accessed 20 September, 2010).

55 CSO, ‘Census 2006: Principal Demographic Results’ (Stationary Office, Dublin, 2007), <http://www.cso.ie/census/documents/Final%20Principal%20Demographic%20Results%202006.pdf>. (Accessed 20 September, 2010).

56 EAI, ‘Evangelical Christians and the Civil Partnership Bill 2009.’

57 Steve Holmes, ‘Irish Evangelical response to civil partnerships’, December 12, 2009, <http://shoredfragments.wordpress.com/2009/12/12/irish-evangelical-response-to-civil-partnerships>. (Accessed 20 September 2010).

beliefs in the value of the individual and the right of religious freedom. In light of this, Stackhouse proposes this form of government is the 'least worst option' and Christians living within it need to recognise some realities. Christians cannot construct the 'New Jerusalem' here on earth by law or coercion. There are biblical sins that it is not realistic or desirable to treat as crimes. For example homosexuality, heterosexual adultery; greed, anger, selfishness and so on should not be legislated against in the courts. Yet, Stackhouse argues

these are the typical responses of many Christians today, frantic to wield what cultural power they have left to conform their societies to their values as much as possible. We need to think about what law can do well and cannot do well in a liberal, pluralized, democratic situation in which we participate as disciples of Jesus and as neighbors to many fellow citizens who are not. *Law is a minimum, not an ideal, which orders our lives together.*<sup>58</sup>

In light of this, Stackhouse proposes that Christians should be seeking law that provides as much justice and compassion and social stability as possible, along with the least curtailment of the freedom of individuals and groups to live as they believe is best.<sup>59</sup> Such a society *requires* toleration of those with whom we disagree out of respect for that person's humanity and freely chosen ethics.<sup>60</sup>

If this positively realistic approach to pluralism shaped the EAI's thinking, it can be seen where this contrasts with the four alternative responses described above, none of which directly engages with the reality of Christian minority status within a plural society.<sup>61</sup> Rather, I would suggest, as Christians seek their own religious freedom within a plural democracy, they need to realise that the 'rights' that they seek for themselves *they also seek for others*. Tolerance works both ways. Christians' defence of religious liberty should not be narrowly self-centred and self-interested. Rather it should defend the right of others to use God-given freedom to make choices about spiritual matters, even when this leads to actions antithetical to the gospel. This form of tolerance is a civic virtue.

However, let me be clear that this does not mean Christians simply embrace relativism or endorse beliefs contrary to their conscience. This distinction was missed by several critics of the EAI statement who wrongly interpreted it as supporting homosexual partnerships.<sup>62</sup> Living with difference is quite distinct from affirming that difference.

58 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 304. Emphasis added.

59 *Ibid.*, 304.

60 *Ibid.*, 329.

61 It should be said that Iona Institute are the most realistic in being keenly aware of the plural nature of contemporary society and arguing purely from a pragmatic basis of what is good for children and societal cohesion.

62 The following responses incorrectly stated that EAI supported homosexual marriage: Christian Concern for Our Nation, 'Evangelical Alliance Ireland urges Christians to support pro-homosexual law', December 10, 2009. <http://www.ccfon.org/view.php?id=924>. (Accessed 1 March, 2009); The Christian Institute, 'Evangelical Alliance Ireland backs Civil Partnership Bill', December 8, 2009. <http://www.christian.org.uk/>

ii. *Realism about Christendom's negative legacy in Ireland*

The EAI statement also attempted to be realistic about what I earlier called the 'baleful' legacy of Ireland's recent Christendom past and political liberalism's associated fear of privileging any one voice (especially a religious one) in the public square. Also mentioned earlier was the need for humility, listening and dialogue by Christians, given Christianity's negative associations with self-interest and power in Ireland. It is clear here that the EAI statement, in light of the Irish context, is drawing strongly on 'holy distinctness' themes and reacting against 'cultural transformationalist' assumptions in how it did not assume any innate rights or privileges for the Christian position.

Evangelical Christians have no automatic right to have their views preferred to those of others. Nor do we have a duty to try and impose Biblical morality on public life by force of law... It is the essence of the Christian faith that it is freely chosen, never imposed. It is a tragedy of church history that the church ever thought it could use the power of the state to impose Christianity on people.<sup>63</sup>

As Christianity moves to the margins of Irish public life, Christians cannot assume that their views will be either heard or understood. Legislation like the CPB raises questions for Christians in terms of how and where they are engaged in *building relationships* with government, politicians and with individuals and organisations within the homosexual community. On this point John Stackhouse proposes,

I do not intend... to encourage a secularist evacuation of all religious institutions, symbols, values, and personnel from public life – not at all. Instead, we Christians should be taking the initiative to surrender those privileges that no longer make sense in a post- or semi-Christian society and instead use our shrinking cultural power to establish new relations of religion/society and church/state that will benefit all participants, including religious communities and state institutions, without unjustly penalizing or privileging any. Indeed, we should use what influence we have left to help construct the sort of society in which we ourselves would like to live once our power to effect it has disappeared... How unseemly it is for Christians to fight in the courts and legislatures for what remains of the dubious honors and advantages of Christendom. There is no more prudent time to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.<sup>64</sup>

It is clear that Stackhouse's thinking here influenced EAI since he is quoted

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news/evangelical-alliance-ireland-backs-civil-partnership-bill. (Accessed 1 March, 2010); The Anglican Irish Church Missions also published a statement accusing EAI of using Scripture 'to justify support for' a sinful lifestyle. See Irish Church Missions Magazine, 'EAI and the Civil Partnership Bill'. <http://www.icm-online.ie/whatsnew>. (Accessed 20 September, 2010).

63 EAI, 'Evangelical Christians and the Civil Partnership Bill 2009'.

64 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 345-6.

approvingly in their statement. In this sense, EAI's acceptance of the CPB can be interpreted as an example of Christian realism, recognising the reality of cultural pluralism and seeking to negotiate peaceful co-existence with, and even seeking rights for, the 'Other'.

### *iii. Realism about the impact of the Bill*

A third area EAI tried to grapple with difficult realities was that of the likely impact of the CPB on society. This had two aspects. One was freedom of conscience. Many of the groups we have mentioned made this a central plank of their rejection of the CPB. The Irish Bishops went as far as to say that 'This Bill is an extraordinary and far reaching attack on freedom of conscience and the free practice of religion.'<sup>65</sup> In their analysis of the issue, EAI concluded that in reality, while a theoretical possibility, this was an unnecessarily exaggerated fear and would be interpreted as a self-interested pretence to oppose the Bill.

The second was whether or not the Bill would undermine marriage. It is evident that the CPB is intensely disliked by many sections of the homosexual community since it is perceived as discriminating against certain citizens on the basis of their sexuality. Only full equality in marriage will be acceptable.<sup>66</sup> The EAI statement frankly acknowledged this reality but argued that the CPB was a reasonable compromise for homosexual and co-habiting couples to register their partnerships and gain the associated legal rights. It was a *civil* ceremony, explicitly not a religious one, which 'does not challenge the traditional understanding of marriage in Ireland.'<sup>67</sup> As hinted at earlier, it is also a moot point whether such legislation is 'where it is at' in terms of major societal change. EAI on balance decided this was a battle of limited significance.

Others disagreed. Which view is correct is open to debate. This is an area of 'wisdom' and 'judgement calls' rather than obvious adherence to biblical truth.

### *iv. Realism about the need for an inclusive pluralism*

Christian realism should, by definition, not equal naivety. Certainly post-Christendom will be significantly (and probably increasingly) less 'hospitable' to Christianity than Christendom. It is perfectly possible that an absolutist secularism will progressively encroach on religious freedom. Christian realists will be aware of the spiritual 'powers' behind fallen human systems of thought and action.<sup>68</sup>

Christians should be forthright defenders of religious liberty since deep in the heart of the biblical narrative is the pursuit of justice for the oppressed and the

65 Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'Why Marriage Matters', 2.

66 For example, on 22 August 2010, two thousand people took part in a public demonstration organised by the lobby group NOISE, rejecting the discrimination inherent in the CPB and calling for full equality on marriage rights. See <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2010/0823/1224277381399.html>.

67 EAI, 'Evangelical Christians and the Civil Partnership Bill 2009'.

68 Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

marginalised. Christians can make the case that agreeing boundaries to human behaviour leads to freedom, not oppression. For in a plural democracy not everyone can 'win' and it is destructive if one group does so.

A realistic Christian response will therefore have a healthy distrust of the human propensity to seek control and impose one's values on others. Christians should resist a 'hard secularism' that criminalises, marginalizes, denigrates or dismisses religious views as illegitimate and results in legal actions like suing people in court for holding Christian views or forcing Christians to retreat from religiously motivated service in the public square.<sup>69</sup> One way of resisting is by coherent persistent articulation of the need for a truly inclusive pluralism<sup>70</sup> and exposing the inherent flaws in an 'illiberal liberalism' that leads to the oxymoron of an enforced mono-pluralism.<sup>71</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore, through the lens of one piece of legislation, some of the specific issues raised for Christians living within contemporary socio-political realities of a fast secularising liberal democracy. I have been arguing that the EAI statement represents, for good or ill, an attempt to articulate a 'Christian realist' approach that seeks to 'maximise shalom'. The debate, I suggest poses at least two searching challenges for Christians in Ireland and elsewhere.

First, there is rarely a public policy which is 'just plain Christian' otherwise Christians would not disagree so much! A challenge for Christians here is how to deal realistically and faithfully with that ambiguity. Let me explain what I mean by this.

In *The Bible in Politics*, Richard Bauckham makes the following interesting observation

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69 It seems that on this point at least EAI, Aontas and the Iona Institute all agree, if not on the strategy of how to respond.

70 For an argument for why Christians should support pluralism see Helm, 'Christianity and Politics'.

71 It is of interest that in the UK the issue of religious liberty is becoming high profile as Christians there become increasingly resistant to a perceived agenda of exclusion from public life. Christians in Ireland will likely face similar issues in the near future. For examples of this discussion see relevant resources at the Kirby Laing Institute of Christian Ethics, <http://www.klice.co.uk/>. See also a report the Equality Bill in the UK by CARE at [http://www.care.org.uk/Shop/Sections/Items/Item.aspx?item\\_id=154835](http://www.care.org.uk/Shop/Sections/Items/Item.aspx?item_id=154835). (Accessed 30 March, 2010). Also see Theos, a Christian think-tank, <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/> and a report they have published called *God: the legitimacy of religious public reasoning* by Jonathan Chaplin, <http://campaigndirector.moodia.com/Client/Theos/Files/TalkingGod1.pdf>. (Accessed 30 March, 2010). For a flavour of how equality legislation is becoming a battle ground for competing rights see <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article7072904.ece> (Accessed 30 March, 2010).

... we need to recognize that the political material in the Bible consists largely of stories about and instructions addressed to political societies very different from our own... The adaptations needed to transfer biblical teaching on personal morality from its cultural situation to ours are comparatively easily made, but a more imaginative and creative hermeneutic is necessary for the Bible to speak to modern political life.<sup>72</sup>

While I make no claim to exhaustive knowledge of global evangelicalism, it seems that even a fairly modest statement of Christian realism like that of EAI appears to strike a very different tone to that of major recent evangelical statements on faith and public square issues in both the USA and the UK.<sup>73</sup> It is also apparent, at least within Ireland, that it is interpreted by many other evangelicals as a dangerous threat to Christian orthodoxy despite affirmations to the contrary by theologians like Holmes and Stackhouse.<sup>74</sup>

Again, I am not concluding EAI is 'the' correct response<sup>75</sup> but I am proposing that at least it represents an attempt to bridge Bauckham's hermeneutical gap between the realm of personal ethics and the complex realities of a modern, democratic and fast-pluralising state. It does this by trying to integrate a commitment to biblical ethics, love of neighbour, the need for humility and the reality of the need for toleration within a plural democracy. Any serious form of contemporary public theology will have to engage with these sorts of issues. In doing so it might arrive at very different conclusions to those of EAI, but appeals to 'the' obvious Christian position that short-cut this sort of theological integration will, in the long term, lack persuasiveness and credibility.

Second, since it is inevitable that Christians will disagree profoundly with one another and with others in terms of conclusions reached, a searching challenge is how to deal with difference in an authentically Christian way.

Regarding disagreements with the 'Other', for the Christian there is a *higher calling* than mere toleration. Jesus calls his followers to love of neighbour (Luke 10:25-37). The whole point of Jesus' parable of course is that this neighbour love is costly, radical and shocking since it is generously offers love across deep gulfs

72 Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (London: SPCK, 1989). 12.

73 For an example of (in my view) a rather defensive response to perceptions of increasing marginalisation of Christians in the UK, see 'Westminster2010: The Declaration'. <http://www.westminster2010.org.uk/declaration/>. (Accessed 30 August, 2010). Based on a similar document in the USA, (The Manhattan Declaration) and signed by many significant and highly respected Christian figures in the UK, it however has little to say about the complex reality of how Christians are to live in a plural society.

74 Commenting on the EAI statement John Stackhouse said 'This brief is one of the most intelligent and wise statements of this sort I have ever read. Clearly borne out of deep Christian conviction, it offers both realism and hope as it articulates a more difficult, but more helpful, alternative to the easy extremes.' EAI, 'Reflection on Responses to the EAI Statement on Civil Partnerships', <http://www.evangelical.ie/docs/Reflection%20on%20the%20Response%20to%20the%20EAI%20Statement%20on%20Civil%20Partnerships.pdf>. (Accessed 7 September, 2010).

of hatred, suspicion and alienation. 'Neighbour love' does not pretend profound differences do not exist. Rather, it says 'I love you as you are, and I respect your difference and freedom; I am also dedicated to helping you to overcome your problems and to flourish in whatever way I can, in whatever way will be truly helpful, and in whatever way you will accept.'<sup>76</sup> What I find largely absent from some Christian responses to minority existence within a plural democracy is what it means in practice to love the 'Other' – in this case homosexual and cohabiting heterosexual couples.

Finally, love poses a searching challenge to Christians in terms of *how* they disagree with each other. Can evangelicals learn to disagree by thinking the best of one another rather than the worst? Can they appreciate the reality that in the ambiguities of post-Christendom Christians will face many issues where wisdom and discernment are required and different conclusions will be reached in good faith? Can Irish evangelicals, and their fellow Christians elsewhere in different contexts, demonstrate grace and forgiveness to each other as well as preach it?

### Abstract

This paper uses the 2010 Irish Civil Partnership Bill as a lens by which to describe and explore different Christian approaches to public theology in general. Interacting especially with the work of John Stackhouse, it analyses the reasoning behind Evangelical Alliance Ireland's (EAI) support of the Bill and concludes that it represents a Christian Realist position. Various other public responses to the Bill highlighted two other theological frameworks shaping alternative negative Christian responses to the Bill; what Stackhouse calls 'cultural transformationalist' and 'holy distinctness' views. It concludes that a credible public theology has to attempt to bridge a hermeneutical gap between the realm of personal ethics and the complex realities of a modern, democratic plural state and that this will seldom be easy or obvious. Inevitable disagreement poses challenges for Christians of how to engage with their 'Other' as well as with fellow Christians operating within different theological frameworks.

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75 In a follow up reflection to the statement EAI acknowledged that the statement was not clear enough that it did not intend to give the impression it represented the 'only possible evangelical response'. EAI, 'Reflection on Responses to the EAI Statement on Civil Partnerships'.

76 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 302.