

11 The Church has been the oppressor of slaves, women and homosexuals, what kind of morality is that?

The Church has been the oppressor of slaves, women and homosexuals, what kind of morality is that? It's really unfair to throw the book at Christianity for every cultural norm that's been held and then dissolved over the centuries. The church isn't always a bastion against change. Sometimes it's a catalyst for change. True Romans 13 says resisting authority is akin to resisting God. Also true is the saying of Jesus *render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's* (Matthew 22:21).

To say *the Church has been an oppressor* is true in part. Romans 13 thinking is conservative. What though about the radical action of Jesus and many of his followers through the centuries? They've often been on the side of the oppressed!

Christianity has taken root in many cultures. As it's done so it's both challenged the cultures it's grown up in and been itself challenged by those cultures. The New Testament acceptance of slavery is clear. So is the vision there of freedom in Christ equally possessed by slave and freed men. When slavery was abolished in the 19th century Christians like William Wilberforce brought this gospel vision out. It can't be denied though that the culture of the liberal Enlightenment also affected the abolitionist thinking of the churches.

You can never prove the rights and wrong of Christianity from history. Christians can be seen helping or hindering the correction of social injustices like slavery. Apartheid in South Africa was defeated mainly by the churches but, most tragically, it had been sanctioned by one church's interpretation of scripture in the first place.

Is it fair to say the Church has oppressed women? Many would say yes! Yes, despite Jesus. His underlining of marriage honoured the women of his day. He himself is seen as equally accessible to women and men in the Gospels. Born of a woman Jesus, God's Son has brought honour to womankind through devotion to the Blessed Virgin his Mother. All of this though hasn't stopped Christianity from being pretty patriarchal.

Nowadays greater visibility is emerging for women across the world. The churches are reflecting this. The example of Jesus in his honouring of women is remembered more. This remembrance is being used to raise women's visibility in the church. In the Catholic and conservative Evangelical traditions there's new determination to affirm women and men as both equal yet different in their ministries. With this has come a reserve about women's ordination as being unfaithful to basic differences affirmed by scripture.

Christians are said to have some times oppressed minorities. Church history isn't a perfect story. The Church has misused power at times as in the evangelisation of American Indians. Even there Christians like Bartholomew Las Casas defended the dignity of the natives. More widely Christian cultures

have developed laws protecting minorities that aren't always found in non-Christian cultures.

Many Christians worked in the 1960s to decriminalise homosexual behaviour in the UK whilst retaining belief in its sinfulness. To shape law to give a right for some to behave in what others see as being wrong is the consequence of Christian teaching on justice. The law can give a right to something without actually making it right.

If the church has oppressed homosexuals in the past the shoe is now very much on the other foot in Britain. A teacher who commends marriage or celibacy in accordance with Christian teaching but refuses to commend a physical same-sex relationship is now vulnerable to anti-discrimination laws.

If Christians have arguments with homosexuals about sex, they have the same arguments with heterosexual people who choose cohabitation rather than marriage. Christianity is for those oriented towards both the same or opposite sexes but the 'orientation' that matters most in sexual morality is for Christians that towards God. Only by God's grace can any of us harness our sexual powers and see them transformed by God towards self-giving love.

The good news is for all – both slaves and free people, both women and men, both homosexuals and heterosexuals. Christianity is the most inclusive of religions! The inclusion that matters most though in it isn't to do with sexuality but with incorporation into Christ in the communion of saints.

This is given for both time and eternity through faith in the risen Christ who *died to gather together the scattered children of God* (John 11:52). That's the Christian distinctive. It's beyond earthly justice and quite out of this world!

Total 775 words - just over 4.5 minutes to read

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