The Merchant of Venice: a Jewish View

In our time, the play has become more a political debating-ground than a work of art deserving sincere and intelligent criticism. And that’s not surprising, for the play is questionable on several counts irrespective of the state of its current political correctness. To begin with, the Gentile faction wins too easy a victory, with too many players, as one might say, on its side. This smudges the moral vision of the play. It is not, I think, a result of the complexity of the issues explored; rather of the playwright’s not bothering to explore them. He chose in this case the easiest way out. Instead of a close texture of human interest sustained throughout the play, where our interest in the action is indivisible from our empathy with the characters, we have the conflict, the *agon*, contracted into two essential speeches, Shylock’s: “Hath not a Jew eyes ... etc.” and Portia’s: “The quality of mercy is not strained ... etc.” Of course, the court-scene itself is a magnificent theatrical composition, with its ups and downs, but, as a scene to deepen our understanding of justice and mercy, it is Game-Set-and-Match to the cock-a-hoop majority, with its special laws restricting the rights of “aliens”; not that one would wish the barbaric right of Shylock to cut out his pound of Antonio’s flesh should have been upheld. But nothing is proved by the fact that it isn’t, except that might is right, so far as the court is concerned. The lawyers and parties interested in Shylock’s come-uppance gloat and proclaim their own moral superiority—superiority based on their supposed Christian faith. Again: this is not to say that the Merchant of Venice himself, Antonio, does not display some moral fineness—in his dealings with his friend and kinsman Bassanio, especially; but his readiness to insult and humiliate Shylock as a Jew (for it is impossible to decide how much his contempt is composed of Christian prejudice and how much of revulsion from Shylock’s general business practice) shows that, to this extent, those who accuse the play of being antisemitic are right to do so: for Antonio is after all the central character of the play in the sense of embodying the values by which the state of Venice ostensibly stands. Ironic, from the playwright’s point of view, since it is also racist in the light of Portia’s remark after the Prince of Morocco leaves her:

  A gentle riddance.—Draw the curtains, go.—
  Let all of his complexion choose me so.
And more culpably purblind in the hypercritical racism Shylock reminds his persecutors of, since they, upon whose lips the truths of Christianity are habitually to be found, own slaves and treat them like dogs.

It seems to me that Shakespeare displays his genius more in Shylock’s prose than in Portia’s poetry. Portia’s speech about mercy is all too beautifully articulate, filled with proper sentiments, sweetly reasonable, unforgettable; and yet the upshot is essentially glib. Perhaps reason is always glib when not allied to passion. She is the arbiter; she has nothing to lose. Shylock speaks out of personal experience of wrong and the history of anti-Jewish persecution. His words too are ever memorable, but we remember the anger and suffering in them as well as the sense. Shylock has lost his daughter as well as his jewels and ducats, and he has become the embodiment of the experience of his people. He does not at this point in the play confuse the loss of his wealth with the loss of his daughter, but he remembers how Antonio has tormented him and how his “nation” has been scorned. I doubt whether there exists in all literature a more moving or more powerful plea for a man’s common humanity to be acknowledged. And how, in the light of this, can we complain about Shakespeare’s “antisemitism”? Yet, if we identify Shakespeare’s understanding with that of the common Venetians in his play, antisemitic he was indeed, though not so far as murderous Nazism. Nor was he to know how irresponsible racism might lead one day to holocaust; but his irresponsibility was, rather, of an aesthetic kind. In failing to explore his subject in all its possible ramifications he let his Gentile Venetians speak for him. That he did not do in the case of Othello which treats a tragic subject tragically, and is “inward” in all its parts. Comedy was perhaps not the best mode for dealing with so tragic a case as Shylock’s—not if he was to represent his “nation”. Marlowe’s Jew was simply a distortion, marvellously created; but Shakespeare could not prevent himself seeing into the depth of life once he had begun on the given theme. Marlowe’s play, The Jew of Malta, is not so painful for a Jew to read, for he can (let us hope) discover no semblance of his own Jewishness or humanity in that terrific dramatic composition. But The Merchant of Venice is different. It speaks for us all; it is, in this speech, as close to life as words can come.

Barrie Mencher
The Incompetent Atheist
or, There is no God and Darwin is his Prophet


Before starting *The God Delusion* I made a prediction, based on some reading of Dawkins’s earlier works. I expected the argument to have the following steps:

The question whether God exists is the first question in religion.
It is a question like any other about existence, to be answered by evidence.
All evidence of existence is scientific.
There is no evidence for the existence of God.
Therefore God does not exist.
Therefore all religion is a kind of deception.

To begin with, it looked as if I was going to be right. Chapter 2, in which the book’s argument begins, is called “The God Hypothesis”, and the one after “Arguments for God’s existence”. *Hypothesis* is a term in science: Dawkins says explicitly that the first question in religion, “the existence of God”, is to be settled scientifically. “Either he exists or he doesn’t. It is a scientific question … ” (p. 48) and “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other.” (p. 50) (Dawkins does not ask why it counts as a hypothesis when there is no conceivable experimental test.)

At this point my prediction went wrong. Dawkins does not draw from the absence of evidence the conclusion that God does not exist. He allows the conceivability of the existence of God and that disproof is impossible. So it is possible that God exists. The question for Dawkins is then one of probability. He has a scale of probabilities from 1 (strong theist, Jung) to 7 (strong atheist, no examples). (pp. 50–1) Dawkins puts himself in group 6, “very low probability, but short of zero. ‘I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.’ ” (pp. 50–1) Dawkins naturally uses the Bertrand Russell example of the celestial teapot. If someone asserts that there is a teapot in orbit round the earth but unfortunately too small to be detected by any scientific means, he cannot be proved wrong, but the chances of his being right are negligible. (pp. 51–2)

“Russell’s teapot, of course, stands for an infinite number of things whose existence is conceivable and cannot be disproved.” (p. 52) If God exists, therefore, Dawkins thinks that it must be as one of the infinite number of things, and in the same way as the possible teapot, for there is only one mode of existence. There is, however, no more evidence ascertainable by any scientific means for the existence of God than of the orbiting teapot, and so we have no reason to suppose he exists.

Dawkins supposes that “I believe in God”—as the Nicene Creed begins, not “I believe that God exists”—really means “I believe that in the physical universe there is an object called God.” No creed in Christendom has ever declared anything so stupid, and until the generation of Darwin and John Stuart Mill nobody was ever stupid
enough to think that that is what anybody meant by “I believe in God”. No orthodox Christian (theologian or not) has ever supposed God to be an object of the same kind as (though bigger than?) a teapot. Perhaps the *protasis* of the Lord’s Prayer in a sort of way asserts existence, “which art in heaven”, but if so not as a hypothesis.

If heaven is undiscoverable by geography or astronomy it does not follow that the existence of heaven is either probable or improbable. Amongst that infinite number of things whose existence, like God’s, is conceivable but can neither be detected nor disproved by scientific means, are many whose existence Dawkins himself (like the rest of us) takes incuriously for granted. In the course of trying to disprove the “argument [for the existence of God] from beauty”, Dawkins speaks innocently of beauty, music and the sublime as real and as if his principles didn’t oblige him to think belief in them every bit as much a delusion as belief in God. “Obviously,” he says, “Beethoven’s late quartets are sublime. … They are sublime if God is there and they are sublime if he isn’t.” (p. 86) But how on earth does he know that the Beethoven quartets exist as music at all, let alone as examples of the sublime and the beautiful? What scientific evidence is there? It is easy to prove the existence, as things in the universe, of quartet groups, of audiences, of cds, of violins, but where is the scientific proof of the existence of the music or its beauty and sublimity?

If God is a delusion because He is undetectable by science then music, beauty, sublimity must be delusions too; and so must literature, poetry, art, love, virtue, heroism, the good—and science itself. By his own standards of evidence Dawkins has no grounds at all for believing in the existence of science. Science can no more detect its own existence than it can God’s or music’s. The question whether science exists is not a question for science; and neither is the question whether God or music exist.

Dawkins thinks of science (or even perhaps of *experiment*) as the ground or source of all knowledge but it can’t be. It can’t, for instance, be its own ground. An *experiment* to *test* whether science exists or not

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1 If anything this is an argument from inspiration. An argument from beauty would be something like: Beauty is very various (a sunset, Beethoven’s late quartets, King Lear’s asking forgiveness of Cordelia, the Parthenon, Orion) and there is no scientific test for the existence of beauty. It is nevertheless real, recognised in personal experience but not personal whim. So perhaps beauty hints at the divine nature. I again predict what Dawkins’s answer would be: beauty is whatever stimulates a certain bit of the brain. For an answer to *that* see *Words in Edgeways* 5, November 2003: if we have identified beauty, some brain activity may be associated with our knowledge of beauty, but nothing can ever be proved beautiful by observation of the brain activity.

No argument for the existence of God will ever convert anybody, but if Dawkins is trying to answer them let him do it. He misunderstands Anselm’s ontological argument. “It is possible to conceive, Anselm said, of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” (p. 80) On the contrary Anselm not only never says that God is conceivable, he explicitly denies it: “Es quiddam majus, quàm cogitari possit.” (*Proslogion* 15) He does conduct an argument based on the intelligibility of comparatives, an argument from language; Dawkins rules out argument from language *a priori*. But there is no point trying to answer an ignorant dismissal of an argument Anselm does not conduct.
(yielding results, which might be confirmed, or not, by further experiments and constitute evidence) obviously pre-supposes the existence of the very thing it is devised to detect. In order to do science it is necessary to know science from non-science but such knowledge isn’t obtained experimentally. It is rather the ground or condition necessary for experiment to take place.

A man, whether it be John Stuart Mill, or Bertrand Russell, or Richard Dawkins, who does not know that the existence of God is not a scientific hypothesis, can have nothing to say about religion. (Can he have anything to say about science?) One necessary thing for anyone entering an unfamiliar intellectual field is to try to understand what its practitioners think they are doing, what sense they are making. It may be that they are making no sense and that their activities are, as Dawkins supposes of theology, all nonsense. But before reaching that conclusion you have to find your way about the subject. When he discusses religion Dawkins does not know what he is talking about. And to loose off boisterous opinions about something one does not understand is the first mark of the uneducated.\(^2\)

Dawkins just denies that any extra-scientific question can be discussed by theology, and that “why?” questions have any meaning (“What on earth is a why question?”(p. 56)), as against “how?” questions. (So, “Why did you lie to me?” has no sense?)

The closely connected second mark of the uneducated is to ignore one’s opponents. As early as p. 17 Dawkins quotes at length an answer to Einstein’s declaration “I do not believe in a personal God”, beginning, “We respect your learning, Dr Einstein; but there is one thing you do not seem to have learned: that God is a spirit and cannot be found through the telescope or microscope, no more than human thought or emotion can be found by analyzing the brain.” If Dawkins had any inkling of the kind of discussion he was engaged on he would have had to try to answer this comment. In fact all he says, in two lines, about his sixteen-line quotation, is “What a devastatingly revealing letter! Every sentence drips with intellectual and moral cowardice.” The intellectual and moral cowardice (as well as the nauseatingly poetical style) is in fact Dawkins’s, for it is a kind of failure of intellectual courage not to confront what your opponents actually say, and goes against one of Dawkins’s own commandments, “Question everything.” (p. 263,\(^2\)

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\(^2\) The reception of The God Delusion in the English “heavies” is fresh evidence of how complete the rule of the uneducated has become. With one exception they were all somewhere between Joan (“the [one-time] thinking man’s crumpet”) Bakewell—gushing brainlessly in the Guardian—and Charles Moore feebly and respectfully demurring in the Spectator. The one exception was Terry Eagleton in the London Review of Books, licensed to be hostile, I imagine, because respectfully left-wing. None was anywhere near as good as Thomas Nagel in the American New Republic.

\(^3\) As reported by Dawkins this is another example of philosophical amateurishness. No qualification without aberration! “Personal” (as against “person” in the special theological sense, translating hypostasis) is not found in any of the catholic Creeds. I do not know the Einstein paper, and perhaps he clarifies what he means; as it stands in Dawkins nobody could know what is meant by personal. That God is a person (if so in what sense?)? That I as a person meet God?
actually from a list picked up from a blogsite, but accepted by Dawkins)
He never questions the all-embracingness of science even when the
challenge is directly made.

But say some sort of scientific experiment proved the existence of
God, what then? What but that atheism would be solidly established and
undeniable? If the God who created the heavens and the earth, and man
in his own image, is proved to be one object (?creature) amongst others,
God as asserted in the creeds certainly does not exist. What exists in His
place is a very superior alien intelligence of the sort that Erich von
Däniken thought built the pyramids and L. Ron Hubbard thought gave
us hang-ups.

If, on the other hand, as Christians, Jews and Muslims believe, it has
been revealed that God created the heavens and the earth, it may not be
unreasonable to doubt the revelation, but it is very stupid to think it may
be established or refuted by experiment.

Is it not strange when a scientist-philosopher has to be reminded that
he ought to be reasonable? The prayer from the cross, “Father forgive
them, for they know not what they do,” cannot be applied to
philosophers. A philosopher who knows not what he does is just
incompetent. His fellow kakangelists (Dennett, Pinker, Chomsky,
Pullman) ought—if they are not in the same pickle—to take Professor
Dawkins on one side and have a quiet word with him. He risks bringing
atheism into disrepute.

… and …

**The Incompetent Theist**

According to Professor McGrath

It is widely held that the scientific method simply cannot
adjudicate on the God-question. The general view is that people
tend to arrive at their religious views on other grounds, and
then use their scientific ideas as retrospective validation of
those views.¹

Well, which? If science cannot adjudicate how can it validate? McGrath
himself does not say that scientific method cannot adjudicate, but offers
a “full and extended discussion” of Dawkins’s views, and “sets out to
ask whether [Dawkins’s] famously aggressive atheism is actually
warranted on the basis of the arguments he presents;”² which concedes
that Dawkins is presenting relevant arguments. McGrath thinks it
relevant that “there are many sane and intelligent individuals who draw
conclusions which differ completely from [Dawkins’s] through precisely

¹ Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*, Malden,
MA, 2005, p. 11

² pp. 11–12
that same humble engagement with the scientific evidence.” So “Anyone who is remotely interested in ideas will find Dawkins an important sparring partner.” On the contrary anyone of common sense will see that theology and Dawkins are not in the same ring.

I am afraid that my reading of Dawkins’ God, as of The God Delusion, was not very thorough, and I may have overlooked something. At any rate, I noticed the objection that would have saved McGrath the need for his “full and extended discussion” only once in his whole book, and then made in passing. “A Christian reading of the world denies nothing of what the natural sciences tell us, except the naturalist dogma that reality is limited to what may be known through the natural sciences.” McGrath does not draw from this the conclusion that Dawkins’s search for scientific evidence is irrelevant to the question of the existence of God. On the contrary, he concludes that “Dawkins raises all the right questions.” It is a mark of the modern age that the theologian who gets published as the Christian answer to Dawkins is on the defensive when talking of spiritual matters and much happier with science.

Professor McGrath could not, naturally, allow The God Delusion to go unnoticed and so SPCK brought out his retort early the following year. McGrath rightly remarks on how rambling Dawkins has become, and seems to take this as an invitation to do likewise, though happily only for 65 pages of text + Introduction. I lost count of the number of times McGrath assures us that numbers of scientists (40% in two surveys conducted at both ends of the twentieth century) believe in God. McGrath’s intellectual agility has not improved either, for instance when he thinks a cause is the same as a necessary condition. As in Dawkins’ God, McGrath here blunders round the edge of a refutation of Dawkins without knowing where he is. He mentions opinions such as Medawar’s that science is not equipped to answer “transcendent” questions, and Stephen Jay Gould’s that science and religion constitute “non-overlapping magisteria”, but has no inkling that this is what he needs, and himself confuses the matter with the idea of “partially overlapping magisteria”. How and where the overlaps come we are not told.

In McGrath, the incompetent atheist has met his match in the incompetent theist. With such an enemy, what need has Dawkins of friends?

Ian Robinson

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3 p. 9
4 p. 149
5 p. 158
6 Alister McGrath with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, The Dawkins Delusion?, 2007
7 p. 38
8 The Dawkins Delusion? pp. 17, 18
9 Perhaps to find out I would have to go elsewhere in the œuvre. McGrath refers us to “The most widely used textbook of Christian theology, which sets out what Christians believe and why, clearly and impartially” (p. 76) written, of course, by himself.
Know your Own Mind, Uplink for Examiners and Moderators

Spring 2006, Issue 5
OCR [Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations]

This 6-A4-page circular to OCR examiners had as its longest item a report “Enthusiastic Response to E-marking Pilot”:

Over 80% of participants said that they were as confident marking on screen as compared to marking on paper and nearly all would feel confident marking online from home if required to do so. Seventy percent of participants also found marking on screen more or equally as enjoyable as compared to paper-based marking.

This is offered as grammatical English by the best-regarded A-level board. As far as I know nobody protested.

The first item in the leaflet was an eponymous A4 page, set out in three columns each of which had a number of separate paragraphs, the middle one having them in boxes. There seemed no reason to begin or end this page at any particular place. A white box with yellowish printing at the bottom of column 1 read:

According to psychological theories of dual processing, people make judgements in two different ways. “Intuitive” judgements are automatic and effortless, whereas “reflective” judgements are slow and controlled.

Researchers suspected that when you mark an examination paper, your usage of intuitive thinking, reflective thinking, or a combination of the two, will depend on the question in front of you, the candidate’s response to it, and your own personal marking experience.

My response as an experienced A-level examiner to the “Over 80% of participants said” paragraph was intuitive, in the sense of needing little time or effort: ‘E. Syntactic incoherence, cannot cope with written English.’

The “research” is at about of the same level. The “tentative framework of cognitive marking strategies” includes as proper intuitive marking an example where “the answer is a visually recognisable item like a letter or a word” when “You compare the candidate response to the correct answer and make a quick, intuitive judgement.” This is not judgement at all: a computer could do it. The next one is, “You scan the answer space, looking to see if a key word, number, or diagram is present. This judgement is mostly intuitive.” This is not only not
judgement, it is the denial of judgement: the assumption that at A level if the key word is used the answer must be right. The third one, believe it or not, is “No response”—that is, the candidate has not answered the question. “You can move immediately to the next question. This is a very quick, intuitive judgement.” No, it isn’t judgement: there is nothing to judge.

The upshot of the research is a “model of marking strategies in a ‘traditional’ exam context” and “we can use it as a base of comparison for emerging qualifications and technologies.”

“Intuitive” thinking is not effortless, nor need “reflective” thinking be either slow or controlled. The discovery, if any, is that sometimes it is easy to class a script, sometimes it takes more thought, and the difference will depend on the question being answered, how it is answered, and your own mind. If this needed to be discovered, the examining board is in an advanced stage of dementia. Know your Own Mind: What mind?

These are the people who award more and more A grades every year. They have no understanding of what it is to think; they are unable to write literate English. How can education survive when they set the standards? How long can language itself survive? You think it is an exaggeration to say that language is moving towards absolute vacuity of meaning? What is the word judgement supposed to mean here? as used by the best-regarded A-level Examining Board? It has no sense.

Ian Robinson
What I learnt from D. H. Lawrence

I learnt, on reading *Twilight in Italy*, that *Hamlet* was not primarily a psychological play but a metaphysical one. That is to say that it encompassed the historical changes in the human psyche that took place between the closing of the Middle Ages and the opening of the Renaissance.

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I learnt, from Lawrence’s Introduction to *Bottom Dogs*, a novel written by Edward Dahlberg and published in 1929, that the modern American obsession with bodily hygiene—which the rest of the Western world is doomed to follow—is a symptom of a deep spiritual malaise (which I’m sure is an idea the Freudians would have concurred with), and, in search of a suitable quotation to support that memory of mine, I came across a passage I used for many years in my professional teaching activities:

And now, man has begun to be overwhelmingly conscious of the repulsiveness of his neighbour, particularly of the physical repulsiveness. There it is in James Joyce, in Aldous Huxley, in André Gide, in modern Italian novels like *Parigi*—in all the very modern novels, the dominant note is the repulsiveness, intimate physical repulsiveness of human flesh …

Now, I don’t know if what Lawrence is saying is actually true, but the idea of “physical repulsiveness” goes deep, deep in me as a person, as a reader, and perhaps it goes as deep, if not deeper, in Lawrence himself; but he has dragged out into the open a general idea, one that cannot but relate “intimately” to the modern craze for bodily hygiene, one which forms part of the matrix of neurotic complexes that make us read Kafka with fascination too. And Lawrence’s procédé is cathartic, his impulse is to heal himself and his neighbour, though he feels his world is doomed to suffer further extremes of negative emotion.

I don’t know what truth, if any, there is in Lawrence’s charge. I don’t know if it’s true of Joyce, Huxley etc., but I’m hooked on the idea. And I’m hooked on the way Lawrence expresses his idea: so plainly, so reasonably, so surely. I can feel his concern for the world, for humanity.

Then again, as I began to re-read this review of *Bottom Dogs*, there were other wonders in store for me, wonders I’d forgotten—perhaps because they were not quite so immediate to my adolescent soul. It was the spiritual history of America no less: the transition between the first pioneers and the subsequent generations. Here was a man thinking for himself about the world, albeit one who had read widely, too. But what he had read he had assimilated, so that his sensibility had been enriched, enriched but never vanquished. It was an object lesson in how to think,
how to write: “In the west you can still see the pioneer work of tough, hard first-comers, individuals, pioneer first-comers who fought like devils against their difficulties, have been defeated, broken, their efforts and their amazing hard work lost, as it were, on the face of the wilderness … ” But I could have quoted from anywhere in this relatively casual review and been struck by the freshness and sanity of Lawrence’s scope and judgement. I cannot praise his work too much. I am what I am, ineluctably, because of it. I don’t mean there aren’t other aspects to my intellectual life, but Lawrence is the mainstream, leaving aside the Old Testament, and the people I have known and loved.

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Returning to whence I began, Hamlet is the springboard of what Lawrence has to say in his review of Bottom Dogs. For, Lawrence’s conception of the Prince involves a recognition that he is a man uneasy in the confines of his too fleshly body: “O that this too solid flesh would melt,/ Thaw and resolve itself into a dew … ” For it is not only the burden of his great task of Revenge that hampers him, but the evils and weaknesses of the Flesh itself that poisons his life, in the form of Ophelia’s betrayal of him, Gertrude’s sexual indulgence with Claudius in the “rank sweat of an enseamed bed”. Oh yes, there is psychology involved too, but did anyone, before Lawrence, see that as secondary to the great historical theme? (“A great literary critic if there ever was one,” said Leavis.) Hamlet’s dilemma is not just his. It is the predicament of modern man, and goes with all the other elements that enable Conscience to make “cowards of us all.” No wonder Lawrence, as he tells us, had always had an aversion from Hamlet. And yet Hamlet cannot help himself, anymore than can we—or Lawrence, though he spent his life trying to conquer the infantile self-consciousness that he suffered from, underneath the outward self-confidence and charm.

And, beyond the passages that deal more specifically with modern America, in the Bottom Dogs review, comes his reference to a phase of humanity that does not suffer from the gangrene of self-consciousness: that phase is the ostensibly primitive one, as Lawrence saw it in the American aborigines, the Red Indians: “It has been said often enough of more primitive or old-world peoples, who live together in a state of blind mistrust but also of close physical connexion with one another, that they have no noses.” The comic hyperbole perfectly articulates what has been perceived as a serious truth.

Barrie Mencher
Letter to Another Editor

To the editor of the Bridge, March 22 2007

Dear Editor,

The leading article in the last Bridge, “Changing Attitude” seemed to me incomplete, incomplete, I would say, to the point of dishonesty.

If we are to ‘change attitude’, we need to know what, quite, we are changing from and to. We can see from the article, of course, that we are to change from being “homophobic” to making—if that’s the right word—“affirmation towards lesbians and gay, bisexual and transgendered people” (and, I suppose, also towards—for why not?—mutually consenting sado-masochists and those of other unspecified orientations). But the article gives us no clue to what counts as homophobia or its affirmatory opposite. How are we to recognize either state, in ourselves or in others? What tests are we to apply?

In order to have changed attitude, is it sufficient, for instance, merely to love those of a different sexual orientation from ourselves as neighbours and fellow sinners towards whom we avoid casting the first stone?

Or are we also obliged, for instance, to welcome ‘homosexual marriage’ as something other than a parody of marriage as traditionally understood? Are we obliged to have no reservations about homosexual adoption or the fitness of “partnered” homosexuals to be bishops? Are we obliged to hold that the transgendered are actually changed in sex—despite whatever of them remains unchanged, beneath the skin, in internal organs, hormones, genes—or, perhaps, that ‘gender’ has nothing at all to do with sex (as traditionally understood)? Are we obliged to think it right that homosexual couples should have the same inheritance tax rights as married couples (as ordinarily understood)? And are we, perhaps, further obliged to hold that it is wrong that couples of other kinds—brothers and sisters, say—should be given these rights too? If we fail to hold that what entitles a couple to tax breaks—that what ought to make them ‘a couple’ in the eyes of the Inland Revenue—is their being joined together in sexual activity (holy matrimony?), are we thereby guilty of a sort of residual homophobia and of having a less than completely changed attitude? If I learn that a child of mine is homosexual, am I permitted to grieve for him on that account or must I root my grief up as a symptom of stubborn homophobia? Are we to snap, finally, all connection between sex and the procreation of children, and, when we have, will the world be a better place? Or is even to ask such questions unacceptably anti-affirmatory and homophobic?
If the article is part of a campaign to make St Andrew’s only the 15th “Open and Welcoming Congregation” in Britain (where ‘open and welcoming’ means not merely and indifferently to all but particularly, or even uniquely, to lesbians, gays, bisexual and the transgendered), shouldn’t the writer or writers spell out more frankly the changes the members of the congregation must make in themselves in order genuinely to qualify?

Duke Maskell