

Off The cuff

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THE EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO THE ROMANS

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:

Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.

And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient:

Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers,

Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents.

Without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful:

Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.



THIS IS UNUSUAL. I don't usually commence my columns with lengthy quotations from the Bible, but I thought my readers should be reminded of what the text actually says. Because, the most interesting thing about Paul's letter to the Romans is, not the death sentence offered to those who work "that which is unseemly", but that the good apostle ranks "murder", with "debate, deceit, malignity", and gossip.

Obedience; obedience to the word of God, transmitted by the leaders of the church, is the key or cardinal value. Consequently, debate, and dispute of authority is not to be contemplated.

Now, there is nothing found here that is intrinsically foreign to the Koran or the Pentateuch. We know, that to this day, people are often murdered by killers acting on God's injunctions against "debate" and "working that which is unseemly".

So, it seems to me, that we should in every circumstance defend debate against God Botherers of all stripes, who seek to silence discussion by murder. By the same token, we should also oppose those faint hearts who wish to prohibit unpleasant opinions by law, by no platforming, by ostracism, and by lies and insults.

We should do this because the only way of establishing the truth or viability of any opinion is by exposing it to criticism, scepticism, and ridicule. We only know the truth or viability of anybody's point of view by applying reasoned argument, by testing its claims against evidence, and perhaps by exposing its absurdity to ridicule. And, of course, even this does not necessarily result in any kind of final agreement or settlement. Inevitably, we have to live with this babble of opinion. After all, it was God who condemned us all to mutual incomprehension, for our hubris in attempting to reach heaven, by building the Tower of Babel.

Nowadays, it is common to condemn to outer darkness those reprobates who insist that trans women, are not the same as those born as women. A similar fate awaits those who insist upon the right of

Jews to be nationalists, or to defend the state of Israel. The catalogue of unacceptable opinions is growing by the day. The effect is to multiply unreason and cloak prejudice, and fore-conceptions, with respectability. Paradoxically, what purports to be liberal tolerance – tolerance of every opinion sanctioned by authority – amounts in practice to the suppression of all those opinions that do not have the ‘seal of approval’.

This is the predicament that the actor, Seyi Omooba, finds herself in. She has had the cheek to challenge what is now the received wisdom that to be homosexual is both good and natural.

“I do not believe you can be born gay, and I do not believe homosexuality is right. [Even] though the law of this land has made it legal doesn’t mean it’s right.”

Seyi Omooba says this because she believes that the Bible is literally true, and consequently believes everything written in it.

Now, it’s obvious to me that you’d have to have failed to read the text with attention, or be deranged in some sense, or at best, insensible to contradiction and confusion, to believe literally everything that is written in the Bible. To me, Seyi Omooba’s opinions about homosexuals are ignorant and absurd and should not be given house room.

It is true that I agree with her that it is unlikely that homosexuals are “born gay”, but I do not go on to believe that “being gay” is some sense a ‘choice’ – the relationship between biology and society, between nurture and nature, are in all likelihood, considerably more complicated than Seyi Omooba would have us believe. Then, there is the question of sin and “the working of that which is unseemly”. Seyi is clearly appalled by homosexuals, although like the Pope, she loves the sinner, but hates the sin.

Consequently, I have no doubt at all that she is perfectly capable of being personable and polite in her

dealings with the homosexuals which abound in her chosen profession.

However, Omooba was originally cast as Celie in Leicester Curve and Birmingham Hippodrome's production of *The Colour Purple*. She has now, been removed from the cast because of the anti-gay comment quoted above, which Omooba had posted on Facebook some years ago.

There are two elements to Omooba's dismissal from the cast which are now being challenged on grounds of religious discrimination by Omooba with the assistance of Christian Concern.

First, there is the way employment has been withdrawn because of an employee's religious opinions. Second, it is asserted that because it is said that the character Celie in the play is lesbian, the role cannot be interpreted by somebody with anti-gay opinions or sensibilities.

Both arguments are manifestly absurd. Nobody should be denied employment because of their religious or political opinions, whatever they are. And, the idea that an anti-gay artist or actor cannot play or interpret the role of a homosexual is akin to saying that a stalwart republican cannot play Henry V or King Lear. Both of these arguments are an affront to religious and artistic freedom.

Seyi Omooba has appalling and, as far as I'm concerned, appallingly stupid and offensive ideas. However, whenever she auditions for a part she must be assessed and judged upon the quality of her stagecraft, upon the emotional conviction, intellectual depth, and potential, of her acting. Judging an actor's religious, political, or social opinions, can have no legitimate role in whether or not they are given parts to play. If that was the case, perhaps our greatest living actor, Vanessa Redgrave, would have rarely worked because her political affiliations and views have, over the years, outraged so many people. She would certainly not have been allowed to play Clementine Churchill in *The Gathering Storm* because we "can't have a Trotskyist playing a High Tory lady!"

It really is nonsense to argue that straight or anti-gay actors must be banned from playing homosexual characters, because of their opinions about God and the Bible. Religious freedom means allowing people who seem to know what God wants and how he wants us all to live, to speak and work without discrimination.

The fact that I am at a loss to know why such people think they are so well-informed concerning the Deity's intensions, and his likes and dislikes, is neither here nor there. Religious freedom means allowing people to think what they like; it means permitting them to establish institutions, churches, private clubs, and forms of worship, they regard as suitable for their co-religionists.

Freedom of speech, inevitably, means allowing people to say things that I find offensive, demented, and dangerous. It also means that they should be allowed to work where they like, provided they can demonstrate the capacity to do the job in question. Of course, I would not give Seyi Omooba a job, counselling troubled gay teenagers, nor would I permit her to run an outreach programme for elderly homosexuals. But, then, 'Thank God' she's not applying to do either.