

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: So, Professor MacCulloch, could we begin by you telling us a little bit about your background?

Diarmaid: I'm from a clergy family, in fact, two generations of clergy, my father, my grandfather, Anglicans, Episcopalian, Scottish Episcopalians. So, I grew up in a clerical household in a very old-fashioned world really. Most of my childhood in a country rectory of the marvellous rambling old-fashioned sort. It was an incredibly happy childhood. Isolated, yes, because of the depth of the country. But I loved it and I partook of the really very conservative sort of Anglicanism that my parents embodied, conservative with a small C, well, or a large Tory C too. And I was a conservative child. But I suppose the great disruption in that, apart from having a certain amount of imagination, was gradually in my early teenage years realising that I was gay.

I can remember sort of things along those lines right back to when I was three or four, but I could begin to put a name to it in the mid-1960s in my teens. I wasn't very happy with it really. Didn't know what to make of it, tried to hide it. And it was really quite late by today's standards when I was 21 when I came out to various people, to myself, and that was the result of having a happy first relationship, sort of teenage romance, which it seems to me had been delayed by the way things were then.

Interviewer: And how did that connect with your faith and church life?

Diarmaid: Curiously, not much of a problem on that. My father was a gently sceptical man despite his conservatism. It was that sort of conservatism, and he'd always taken a sensible attitude to the Bible and its contents. He was more than gently satirical about conservative evangelicals among his clerical neighbours. And he was a moderate high churchman, and so often that was a way forward into thoughtfulness it seems to me.

So, actually, the church wasn't a problem to me. It was a great sheltering, comforting institution. I loved old churches, still do, absolutely adore the feeling, the tranquilly of old churches. So, there was a lot which was sheltering about the church. And I've always hung onto that. I've never lost my affection for the church though I very frequently lost my affection for those who lead it.

Interviewer: Thank you. Could you tell us a little bit about the reasons why you chose to take a public stand in relation to issues of sexuality?

Diarmaid: It's an interesting question as to why I should have decided to be public. I guess I've always had the attitude that if something's there you deal with it and I'm by nature a teacher. I teach history. I love expounding truth, I guess. And one of the lessons my parents dinned into me was always to tell the truth. I think they were subsequently a little worried by the effects of this. But in the end, they saw the point, and I've always tried to stick to that. If something's there, you talk about it. And hypocrisy has always infuriated me. Evasiveness has always infuriated me. So, given all that, it was only natural to get involved. And I got involved with what was then the Gay Christian Movement fairly early in its existence and I was in my mid-20s, so, I was a postgraduate, I think. Very early member indeed. I think it's a bit like the Nazi Party being in the Gay Christian Movement. You've got your number on your card indicates when you joined and I was about number 13 or something like that and was involved in the local Gay Christian Movement group we had in Cambridge. I was already thinking about ordination at that stage, so that became an issue very quickly, talking about I guess 1977 or so then.

Interviewer: So, your natural love of truth and your hatred of hypocrisy was really what motivated you to take a public stance.

Diarmaid: I think it was. And the fact that very quickly I shed any moral philosophical worries about being gay. It just seemed to me so obvious that being gay was not an issue with moral issues attached to it. There was nothing to talk about in a sense which is why a hell of a lot of talking needed to be done because the church was still in a position where it regarded it as one of the most awful problems, when it bothered thinking about it at all. Its basic assumption in the 70s was still that this was beyond the pale, there was no discussion needed.

[0:05:37]

Interviewer: Would you like to illustrate this with perhaps just a quick snapshot of one of the best moments during that period for you and one of the worst moments?

Diarmaid: Best moments was obviously first love, absolutely great, being rather teenage it didn't last. But that just showed me that there really wasn't a problem. This was just like any other love affair might be. Worst moments? Well, my first encounter with going forward to ordination where I sort of blithely went to see a Director of Ordinands and said I was gay and instantly the atmosphere changed. He said, "Well, this is obviously a complete block to ordination". And I was aghast. I mean how naïve can you be? And I got really rather cross and aggressive and emotional, which I don't like, frankly.

But things spun out from there. I went to see another DDO who was doing his best to be much more thoughtful. He clearly liked me and he said, "Well, perhaps it's a phase. Perhaps it's a phase". I said, "I don't think so really". And so that was my first explorations of getting ordained and that's the late 1970s.

Interviewer: And so, you became a Deacon in the Church of England, but you chose not to go any further than that.

Diarmaid: Yes, that takes us into the mid-1980s, by which time I've been teaching actually in a Methodist theological college as an Anglican on the staff there. And therefore, training people for the Methodist ministry, all that involved. And in that this call to ordained ministry came back as I saw it. And so, I went to Bristol diocese where I was living at the time. Rather more wary this time, but in fact got a rather good initial response and the bishop backed me to go to an ordination conference and ordained me deacon. But again, I my fatal naivety and truth telling took over during that diaconal year, which was very busy and enjoyable, but I made no secret at all of having a partner as I just had entered a relationship at that stage. And as I look back, it was going to be impossible to go forward.

It was just the time when the church was being forced to deal with this thanks to a maverick evangelical in General Synod at that time called Tony Highton who put a motion up about homosexuality and the bishops were so scared that they more or less shuffled behind this motion. So, the Bishop of Bristol was then sort of caught in the headlights on this and chose to say, "Well, I can't ordain you to the priesthood yet. Maybe later".

And then I was enraged by that and so withdrew from the ministry. All hell broke loose actually. It was the first time that the national press had had a chance to test out what this Highton motion meant. So, I was besieged by reporters. We had to flee the house, go on impromptu holiday. It was not at all nice. I recommend being turned down for ordination as a very good way of losing weight. Beats anything else I've ever known.

And it was worse because this extended into the Methodist church who were my employers, and there was a very determined move by conservatives in the Methodist church to not have my contract renewed. It was coming up before the Methodist conference, it was the equivalent of a bishop in the Methodist church.

Conference behaved marvellously. They immediately went into private session. They not all the journalists to leave. They discussed it in that good, straightforward fashion that Methodists have. And they backed me. And I'm told, and this is really very touching, that quite conservative former students of mine got up in conference and gave me their backing. Very touching.

So, I was there, safe for the job in the Methodist Church, but with no prospects of ordination and feeling profoundly wounded frankly. Here is an institution which I had always regarded as my mother. A parent. And it had kicked me in the teeth. That's a profoundly damaging feeling. And it changed my career really. Well, it ensured that for the future my career was going to be in teaching history. And that's where it stayed.

[0:10:57]

And I can't say I'm distressed by that because I've had a marvellous career. And what I've tried to do in it, and was also already trying before all this happened, was to use my skill and enthusiasm as a researcher and teacher in history to bear on this great problem of why Christianity has got so hung up about sexuality. And I've written a lot incidentally on that. But it's always been part of the greater project of exploring the history of the church. And I'm glad that one of the byproducts has been both books and now a TV show which have explored these issues and helped other people.

Interviewer: Thank you. In that you have already answered many, many of the questions I have before us. But you are a historian of the church. Is it your perspective that the church's attitude to sexuality issues is becoming more negative or the reverse? And would you like to offer any reasons for that?

Diarmaid: I'd say the attitude of religion to sexuality is now becoming much, much more polarised. And it's part of a much greater polarisation which is not exactly caused by homosexuality. It's caused by the changing role of women in relation to men. Most great world religions are male-centred, and they're predicated on the assumption that a heterosexual man is the best thing around and that God approves of the leadership of heterosexual men. That's just thousands of years of history.

And that is simply no longer plausible. And what we're hearing from conservative religion, whether it's Muslim or Christian or Jewish, is a great howl of rage from men that their position has been challenged. And homosexuality is just part of that because this is a way in which men have always felt vulnerable. Heterosexual men, particularly going into the Christian ministry, are entering a role, pastoral role, which is basically feminine, which is about nurturing, which is about accepting. That's part of the role of priesthood. And they've always therefore felt very nervous about that role. And they've always asserted their masculinity, particularly I think in Protestant churches since the Reformation. And now all that's up for grabs. Women in the ministry, openly gay men in the ministry, openly gay women in the ministry. All these things are traumatic for heterosexual men who are uncertain about their sexuality. And that seems to include a great many Anglican bishops at the present day.

So, there's a huge problem for the church. It's the church's problem. It's not the world's problem. And the church simply has to sort it out. And if my efforts that are analysing the problem help, I'm pleased.

Interviewer: And perhaps also it is a problem that the church has with its image of God, its model of God. It has set God up as a patriarch, as a heterosexual male, and that God is now dead. And that is also creating huge disruption for many clergy and bishops perhaps.

Diarmaid: Yes. Old models of God don't work in the way they did. And that is a real problem, particularly for those who feel safe inside firm structures, not just of institutions, but of thought and doctrine. The church has got 2,000 years of argument about doctrine. Perhaps in 17th century it thought it had sorted most of these problems, become apparent in the last 300 years it didn't. That's been a problem even before sex became the issue. It's what you do with a sacred text at the heart of your religion. And the way in which we view sacred texts has been shifting and disintegrating since at least the mid-17th century. And then in the 19th century, the challenge of the place of women became quite apparent, 20th century the same things happened. So, we're in this process and one thing I always say to my students, and more widely, is that Christianity is a very young religion. It's only been around for 2,000 years, which is nothing in the history of human consciousness. So, you wouldn't expect Christianity to get its solutions right very quickly.

[0:15:54]

The trouble is conservatives don't understand what to be conservative about. Conservatives generally don't understand history and therefore they're frightened by change when it happens. A true traditionalism isn't frightened by change because it understands a tradition isn't something rigid and fixed, it's more like a plant.

[Phone rings]

Interviewer: So, this is a continuation of Mark Chaytor's conversation with Professor MacCulloch.

Diarmaid: One thing which I've come to feel very strongly as a historian is that so-called traditionalists don't understand tradition. They see tradition as a very fixed, rigid thing, like a stone with a structure. And it seems to me that tradition is much more a living thing. It's a plant or a vegetable. And therefore, it changes its shape, its appearance, its content while retaining the same basic essence identity. So, a true traditionalist is liberated from rigid conservatism. And that gives me hope. As I look at the present turmoils of the Anglican Church this seems to be a profoundly hopeful moment, and the noise and the anger of so-called traditionalists is a sign that they know they've lost.

Interviewer: Are there any particular milestones when you look back over your involvement with Coming Out and with the movement for liberation of LGBT people that you want to recall?

Diarmaid: I guess one of the most satisfying and important moments for me was when the House of Lords rejected an attempt to stand in the way of equal marriage. Because of its symbolism, here is this assembly of granddads and grandmothers who you'd expect to be very conservative, and in many ways, many of them were. But what it seemed to me was happening was that they'd listened to their grandchildren and their grandchildren said, "Granny, look, you can't be serious about this. There's really no problem". And that that was coming out from so many speeches in that moment. Profoundly satisfying.

I must say that, as a footnote, I did contribute to one speech in the House of Lords. My producer of my TV series, Sex in the Church is actually a peer, a hereditary peer, Charles Colville. And he asked me before the debate, "Look, I really want to speak upon this and I want to say what we said in the TV series. Can you help me write a speech?" So, between us we wrote a speech about the importance of marriage and also its flexibility, its fluidity over time, and that's what Charles said. I think by that time the die

had been cast. The Lords had already been put on the right path. But if I've done anything in my career, that has been one of the most satisfying moments. It makes it all worthwhile.

Interviewer: Thank you. One final question. What are your hopes for the future regarding LGBT acceptance?

Diarmaid: Well, in a narrow denominational way, I want to see gay bishops in the church perfectly happy with saying, "I'm gay. And this is my partner". I want Lambeth Palace no longer to dally with East African bishops who, whatever they say, are on the side of persecuting gay people. I want a church which actually is in tune with the national mood and doesn't throw pastoral obstacles in the way of making its work that of a national church, a proper established church. In a funny way, I'm still very conservative about the Church of England. I love it as an established church, as an institution which embodies the nation. And it's not doing its job at the moment. And I want to see that very much, not to belittle other churches, not to belittle other religions, but to see it as a national institution which really owns its responsibility to the nation.

Interviewer: Professor MacCulloch, thank you very much indeed.

[End of Transcript]