

“The Right Not to Be Offended”: The Secularized Discourse of the Anti-Gay Christian Movement

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Abstract

The subject of gay and lesbian rights is one of the most vexed and challenging issues facing contemporary Christianity. In line with other elements of the non-heterosexual liberation movement, lesbian and gay Christians in the United Kingdom (UK) have sought to organize and mobilize. Their aim is to extend and protect what they regard as fundamental human and civil rights. A countervailing Christian movement, articulated through various factions, has arisen to confront the non-heterosexual lobby. This paper explores the strategy adopted by conservative groupings seeking to forcefully reply to their highly vociferous opponents who have appealed to both church and secular agencies with the language of “rights”. Such a response increasingly involves a discernible shift from a discourse of “sin” and biblical prohibition as the conservatives engage in their own secular rhetoric related to “rights”, thus arguably indicating wider processes of “internal secularization” within the Christian churches.

The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement

In the UK, as in many Western societies, lesbian and gay Christian groups have proliferated with various levels of success in advancing their civil rights. As the core representative body, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) was established in 1976 in order to provide a common forum for a number of “cause” groups from different denominations and to advance their interests in both the churches and secular world. To this end the LGCM’s mission statement begins by outlining its aim:

To encourage fellowship, friendship, and support among individual lesbian and gay Christians through prayer, study and action, wherever possible in local groups, and especially to support those lesbian and gay Christians subjected to discrimination.¹

Further mission statement aims include encouraging the broad Christian Church to re-examine its understanding of human sexuality and to work for the wider acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships; to witness the Christian faith within the gay community at large; and to establish international links with secular, as well as other gay and lesbian Christian agencies.

Gill (1989: 2-102) provides the definitive account of the LGCM’s brief but troublesome history in the UK up until the late 1980s, tracing the movement through various stages: the early years in which the movement found its footing and attempted to establish an identity; a period of relative growth and progress (1977-84); the years

¹ LGCM web-site, <http://www.lgcm.org.uk/html/aims.htm> http (accessed March 23, 2008).

1985-88 entailing the creation of an inclusive movement in terms of males and females, by denomination, and by gaining support for the LGCM’s challenge of institutionalized homophobia more stridently at a time when many denominations appeared to increasingly accept the legitimacy of the “gay debate”, if not the cause of the LGCM.²

With its greater visible during the 1980s, the LGCM was subject to a backlash from many churches. Perhaps most notably, evidence of a reactionary stance was abundantly clear in the Church of England Synod in 1987 when a motion to ostracize gay clergy was passed, albeit with amendments which allowed bishops to obtain from a comprehensive purge. During these years members of the LGCM found their cause harder to promote in some denominations than others. This was particularly so for Roman Catholic gays and those from the more conservative Protestant constituencies who staunchly defended their traditional biblical stance against homosexuality. Other churches found the subject uncomfortable to engage with and, as in the case of the Methodists and Anglican Church, major divisions of opinion ensued.

Against this background, diverse conservative Christian grouping began to mobilize in opposition to the LGCM. Evidence of this in the Anglican Church was clear when opponents sought but failed to have banned the thanksgiving service in Southwark Cathedral in 1996 to celebrate the achievements of the LGCM’s first twenty years. Persecution continued despite notable advances. In 1998, the 750 bishops of the world-wide Anglican Communion, meeting in Canterbury for their ten-yearly Lambeth conference, made their harshest condemnation of homosexuality to date, with the passing of a resolution rejecting homosexual practices as “incompatible with Scripture” and that “abstinence is right for those who are not called for marriage”.³

Strategies of Opposition

Conservatives of contrasting hues, both Catholics and Protestants, have adopted various strategies in opposing the LGCM’s cause. Although disagreeing among themselves on many issues, the controversy of homosexuality appears to be one of those to which the great majority of conservatives Christians are united in opposition. They have conventionally focused on the significance of a small number of biblical passages related to homosexuality which are deemed as constituting a moral absolute binding on the Church today. On such grounds the great number of denominations in the UK have also taken their stance, issuing policy statements, if less aggressively, regarding homosexuality but little in respect of lesbianism and far less on the subjects of bi-sexual and transgendered sexuality. Typically, however, many mainstream churches have modified the once prevailing view that condemned *both* homogenital expression and the homosexual condition/orientation as sinful and prohibited by God. Gay orientation is more acceptable, homogenital behaviour is not. This more liberal orientation is not a position universally endorsed by most conservative evangelical constituencies.

² One significant development in the late 1980s was the establishment by the LGCM of the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality. Its primary aim was to facilitate education and discussion of all aspects of human sexuality within the broad Christian community.

³ Human Sexuality, Resolution I.10 (b).

The emphasis on biblical interpretation has meant that the “gay debate” continues at a theological level. Even before the establishment of the LGCM, those who sought to extend gay rights within the churches were locked within a largely barren theological debate with conservative evangelical Protestants and to a lesser extent traditional Catholics. Theologically speaking, gay Christians are largely liberal in orientation.⁴ Many have embraced a “higher criticism” and sought to re-interpret the key scriptural texts, bringing a contextual understanding of the homophobia of biblical times and criticizing the conservatives for picking and choosing the sins they censure.

There have been a number of strategies taken by anti-gay rights Christian groups that supplement the biblical basis of their position. The first may be termed “the numbers game”. Conservative Christian organizations are keen to provide evidence that those with a gay orientation are a much smaller minority than their opponents suggest, thus rendering them even more a deviant sexual constituency and subsequently devaluing their claims to public acceptance. In 2008 a conservative “cause” group, The Christian Institute, published an article on its web-site⁵ quoting a Government survey which claimed that merely one in every 100 people in the UK describe themselves as homosexual.⁶ Less than one per cent said they were “bisexual”. The same article also pointed to the last National Census (2001) which appears to confirm there are fewer than 40,000 same-sex households (0.2 percent of the total) in England and Wales.

There is a second strategy to be observed. Conservative Christian groups in the UK are skilled in presenting themselves as quasi-academic or research bodies that produce statistics suggesting that gay and lesbian people are not genetically predisposed towards their sexuality. The emphasis on scientific research is partially a response to the position taken by the LGCM which falls back on the evidence of the genetic basis of homosexuality such as that produced by the United States National Cancer Institute which indicates that 82 percent of gay men carry a marker, the Xq28, on the X chromosome. In the past the approach taken by Christian groups opposed to the gay rights movement has occasionally backfired. One alleged “fact” produced by some constituencies in the USA related to the so-called “gay lifespan” based on spurious research including the discredited work of Paul Cameron which was rejected by several academic bodies.

Despite such set-backs, anti-gay rights groups seize every fragment of research evidence which support the conjecture that gay sexuality is in some way “nurtured”. The *Christian Institute Magazine*⁷ in 2006 carried an article entitled “Gay Rights versus religious Rights” in which it stated:

It is often said that homosexuals need civil rights because they are ‘born gay and can’t change it’. But this is against the evidence. One leading psychologist found that homosexuals (84%) could become heterosexual through psychotherapy.⁸

⁴ As part of this battle against the conservatives a significant initiative was the creation in 1979 of a separate Evangelical Fellowship within the LGCM. The group is specifically directed to work amongst many arch-enemies in the evangelical wing of the Church.

⁵ ‘Official poll reveals, gay numbers hype’, Christian Institute http://www.christian.org.uk/issues/2008/family/gaystats_28jan08.htm (accessed March 20, 2008).

⁶ In the survey of 4,000 people conducted by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) 94.4 per cent said they were heterosexual.

⁷ *Christian Institute Magazine*, April, 2006, 2.

⁸ Spitzer (2003).

The blame for a gay orientation is consequently attributed to a fallen world where people are “abused” and models of homosexual behaviour are evident. In response to the gay gene theory, The Christian Institute resists any notion that gay men and women are “born that way”:

Teenage boys can be confused about their sexual attractions. They can go through a phase of being attracted to those of the same sex, but in the vast majority of cases they simply grow out of it and develop normal attraction for women.⁹

A third strategy of note is for anti-gay rights Christian lobbyists to portray the gay cause as constituting a “public menace”. There is a tendency to link the LGCM with promoting promiscuity, pornography, paedophilia and sadomasochism, all of which are portrayed as posing a public threat. This has included the use of fairly emotive and provocative language. The literature produced by The Christian Institute refers explicitly to “obscene behaviour” by way of describing gay sex and points out that the terminology used in UK law includes frequent reference to “buggery”.¹⁰ Concerns about AIDs since the early 1980s has also been used by conservatives to attack the gay community with the assertion that “true” Christians should wish for and positively be active in revoking permissive legislation. If AIDs was not God's judgment, it was at least a discernible repercussion for breaking his laws (Gill 1989: 66).

The LGCM is also castigated for its relationship with the wider gay movement in condoning promiscuity through its literature, including such controversial texts as *The Joy of Gay Sex* and *The A-Z of Gay Sex*. Also by way of example, The Christian Institute has made much of the LGCM's Internet publication of the work *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name*, a poem that was one of only two pieces of literature in the twentieth century adjudged “blasphemous” by a UK court. It portrays the centurion guarding the tomb of Christ indulging in sexual acts with his corpse and attributes homosexual inclinations to Christ himself.¹¹

While the LGCM is subject to deviant labelling, the conservative anti-gay factions promote themselves as guardians of public good and supporters of public consensus. The Christian Institute, for instance, has advanced the view that a change in the law of the age consent is not supported by the UK public, pointing out that according to British Social Attitudes, the most respected survey of public opinion, some 70 percent of the UK population opposed it and a similar percentage considered that homosexual practices are “always or mostly wrong”.¹² The CI points to the findings of opinion polls:

as evidence that gay sex at sixteen was deeply unpopular....not morally equivalent to heterosexual intercourse, with considerably increased medical risks, and that homosexuality is something which sets people apart from the rest of society (Calvert 1997: 4).

Gay Rights as a Secular Issue

⁹ LGCM n.d.b: 3, quoting the Christian Institute's *Bankrolling Gay Proselytism*, 1999.

¹⁰ The Christian Institute, Annual Report, 1997/8, 15.

¹¹ Christian Institute 2002. "Briefing Papers, 2002, <http://www.christian.org.uk>. (accessed November 12, 2002).

¹² The Christian Institute, Annual Report, 1997/8, 15.

In general the cause of gay rights has enjoyed a greater legitimacy since the 1960s.¹³ The British Parliamentary Act of 1967 (Sexual Offences Act) legalized homosexuality for those twenty-one years of age or older. Several conservative Christian groups began to mobilize themselves against such reforms in the 1970s, although the origins of some can be traced back a decade earlier in organized resistance to permissive legislation in general (Parsons 1994). The two principal factions - the National Festival of Light and the National Viewers and Listeners Association - condemned what they frequently termed "militant homosexuality" as a perversion of God-given sexuality and saw it as the greatest threat to family life in the UK.

A further period of conservative mobilization occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s at the time of the consecutive governments of the Conservative Party (Hunt 2003). These administrations set a negative agenda regarding gays and lesbians rights - a task made easier by the anxiety aroused by the spread of HIV during this period. State policy climaxed in the passage of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act (Department of Education Circular 12/88) which prohibited local authorities from allowing schools to adhere to the "promotion of homosexuality" and from "intentionally....promoting homosexuality or allowing the teaching...of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship".

Since 1997 the social democratic-orientated Labour Party has attempted to gain a widely based public appeal in social policy including that of gay rights. Recent discriminatory laws in the UK have opened up a new stage for the LGCM and their opponents. A perceived greater public acceptance towards the gay cause and the aggressive stance of the gay lobby led to a further liberalization of the law, although the reforms did not include a repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act. In 1997 legislation was passed to lower the gay age of consent from 21 to 18 and in 1999 from 18 to 16. Both the gay Christian movement and its opponents have subsequently mobilized resources around these issues in the realization that the liberalization of the law was likely to have a measureable consequence on the debate concerning the rights of gays within the churches.

As far as the LCGM is concerned, there has been an appeal to wider universal principles within the framework of the extension of civil liberties, thus portraying conservative Christians as opposed to enlightened secular development. This is more than conveyed in this extract from a LGCM's pamphlet:

It is only when homosexuals or black people or women stand up and demand just treatment and challenge prejudices, that any change is possible. When they do this of course they must expect abuse and ridicule, such has always been the case, but justice is worth a fight.¹⁴

During the November General Synod in 1999, the LGCM published the report *Christian Homophobia* on alleged Christian discrimination against homosexuals. The report claimed that the words and actions of Christian churches support most of the homophobic abuse suffered in the UK by gays and lesbians. It claimed that the churches have a disproportionate influence on legislation impacting gay and lesbian

¹³ Some elements of the wider Christian community in Britain were ahead of the politicians in calling for a liberalization of the law since in the Church Assembly of the Anglican Church, a majority of representatives voted, albeit marginally, for the decriminalization of the homosexual act as early as 1957. The call for decriminalization was not, however, to justify the act morally.

¹⁴ *LGCM Briefing on Homosexuality and Christianity*. pamphlet, 2001.

people and have “tried to defy the will of parliament and the international consensus on human rights”. The report went on to maintain that a significant number of gay clergy had been dismissed and made homeless and reduced to living on state benefits.

The report made 74 recommendations for good practice. Several of the most significant that refer to the universal principles of liberties are as follows. Firstly, that national and regional church bodies should develop and implement a “fully inclusive equal-opportunities policy” with reference to lesbians and gay men. Secondly, that language should be inclusive and make no distinctions between “Christians” and lesbian and gay men in church literature and liturgy. Thirdly, that all church posts should be advertised in the lesbian and gay press, and all existing staff should receive training in homophobia awareness similar to the racism-awareness training that is now beginning to be implemented. Fourthly, that all churches should make available same-sex blessings, while liturgical bodies should begin the process of approving services for these. Finally, that theological colleges should “provide students with the exegetical tools to combat biblically-based homophobia”.

Following the LGCM’s initiative, the Faith, Homophobia and Human Rights Conference held in February, 2008, (supported by 52 organisations and attended by 250 delegates), attendees issued a statement¹⁵ calling on:

all people of goodwill, of whatever faith or none, to affirm and celebrate human equality in all its dimensions and particularly to work for the elimination of any faith-based homophobia and institutionalised prejudice towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people....We reject the activities of certain religious leaders, seeking exemptions from equality legislation, and attempts to base this on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, such a right being for all, not just for some....We call for further progressive public policy that will deliver comprehensive and effective anti-discrimination legislation, including positive duties, on the basis of race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, and belief. We call on the newly formed Commission for Equality and Human Rights to listen to the experience of LGBT faith networks and those who have suffered homophobia from and within religious organisations.

As part of its broad strategy the LGCM has courted association with wider gay communities by making common cause with their struggles. As early as 1976 the LGCM offered a submission to the policy advisory committee of the Criminal Law Revision Committee arguing for an equal age of consent for homosexuals and heterosexuals, reinforcing the arguments put forward by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. There is a limit to such a strategy however. Many secular gay organizations regard the Christian Church as one of the prime generators of homophobia. The attempt by a LGCM delegate to speak at the end of the 1976 Gay Pride march was met with hostility and, since 1981, Gay's the Word bookshop has refused to stock the LGCM's more moderate literature. The matter of relationship with the gay community has also weakened the internal unity and cohesion of the LCGM. A sizeable number of members are not prepared to followed the tactics of OutRage! - one of the broader gay movement's militant wings - in “outing” gay bishops. While the LGCM has occasionally displayed a more direct campaigning stance, such as the interruption of church services, not all members endorse such tactics.

¹⁵ http://www.lgcm.org.uk/fhconference/Conference_Statement.html (accessed March 29, 2008).

“Internal Secularization” and the Rhetoric of “Rights”

Notions of the “internal secularization” of the Christian churches have long been central to the “hard” secularization thesis. However, academic interpretations of what this means in essence have varied somewhat. It has been given to denote the process through which secular tendencies infiltrate the churches, forging a superficial form of religiosity (Herberg 1956); a this-worldly orientation of the churches that departs from the “fundamentals” of the faith and emphasis on the here-after (Luckmann 1967: 36); or, alternatively, what Dobbelaere (1981) refers to as “Transposition” which includes an increasing adaptation to, or growing conformity with the contemporary world.

The approach to “internal secularization” adopted for the purpose of this paper is closer to the understanding advanced by Bryan Wilson (1966). For Wilson, religion in the Western setting is reduced to a marginalized position in the secular world with minimum significance and influence in any given realm of social life. In a pluralist setting, the Christian viewpoint becomes one view among many: it loses authoritative status. The churches are thus forced to compromise in order to survive or at least supplement their authoritative claims in the public sphere.

How are “internal secularization” processes related to an understanding of the way that the “gay debate” is expressed in the churches? What is particularly significant is that the debate includes the petitioning of the secular world. This provides a marker indicating how peripheral the Christian constituency has become in the UK since it is obliged to court wider non-church agencies and engage with the broader discourse of civil liberties. This position is perhaps more readily and understandably adopted by the liberal orientated Christian gay movement. However, it is one also increasingly utilized by conservative Christian lobby groups that are forced to endorse the logic of their opponents in order to resist them and gain public support.

Such a tendency is partially evident in the need to fall back on “scientific” evidence regarding the nature of gay sexuality and the claim to be working for the “public good”. Moreover, while their objection to homosexuality remains ultimately biblically-based, conservatives have discernibly diluted their essentially moral element in order to defend their position and to partake of the secular language that had long been embraced by their liberal counterparts (Davies and Hunt 1999). This was evident in the spurious attempt to support women's rights when a band of miscellaneous conservative protesters handed out anti-gay leaflets at the Lambeth conference of the Anglican Church in 1998 proclaiming that “homosexual practices are a diabolically deviant act and an unnatural discrimination against womankind”.

A subsequent question is why some conservative groups do not limit themselves to restricting gay rights within the Church; instead, they are also concerned with curtailing the advancement of rights in the wider secular sphere. Once more there remains a biblical basis to this strategy and relates to what Thompson refers to as the “Ezekiel factor” (Thompson 1997: 169-70). In short, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel warns that, no matter how devout they are, God's people cannot stand aside seeking personal salvation while God's judgment falls upon others. Unless they “blow the trumpet”, the blood of the sinful will be upon the heads of the godly. Attempting to prevent people from sinning by lobbying for legislative change is part of this biblical justification including, if possible, the criminalization of the homosexual act.

At the rock foundation to their approach to rights conservatives still ultimately fall back on moral arguments against rights issue as this extract from The Christian Institutes indicates:

The LGCM talk of “rights” and “equality for homosexuals”. They refer to homosexuals as “downtrodden” and compare their opponents to the bigoted hate mongers of the American deep south during the black civil rights campaigns. However, Christians represented by groups such as *Reform* and Anglo-Catholic group *Cost of Conscience*, feel bound to the Bible's clear injunction against homosexual practice....[I]f we accept a homosexual “Christian” movement, there is no reason why we should not also have an adulterer's Christian fellowship and a sex-before marriage fellowship.¹⁶

Various attempts at impacting the political world have been adopted by the anti-gay constituency (Hunt 2004). The more obvious campaigning techniques are lobbying, demonstrations, and counter demonstrations. Petitioning MPs in both Parliamentary chambers have been the most direct assault on the gay cause, and the initial defeat by the House of Lords against lowering the age of consent from 21 to 16 can be at least partly attributed by some conservative Christian groups to lobbying pressures.

Most of the main political parties in the UK already have small informal caucuses of conservative Christians within them. Yet, the attitude of the conservative religious lobby and the views of the Conservative governments from 1979 throughout the 1980s on gay sexuality, the breakdown of the family, and single parent families brought no straightforward alliance during the greatest period of reactionary backlash. The group of greatest significance is perhaps Conservative Family Campaign founded in 1986, which numbered ten Conservative members of the House of Commons and one Anglican bishop among its supporters. It also claimed to have the support of 24 members of the House of Lords.

The development of effective lobbying skills to influence non-Christian members of Parliament has been a major plank for the conservatives. Senior politicians are enticed, brought on side, and then offered material assistance in terms of information, researchers, and consultants for policy issues on which they share a common concern. Both The Christian Institute and CARE operate in this way within the Houses of Commons and Lords. As charities bearing the name “Christian”, senior politicians are often prepared to become trustees or non-executive directors, and this increases the lobbying and networking power of these groups.

Despite these tactics it is evident that conservative Christian groups have come to realize that biblical quotes and theological arguments do not strike accord with the public at large or politicians, even though their primary objection might be theological. This realization has enabled such groups to fight on the relatively new front of public policy and to have a greater ecumenical breadth. By emulating USA American Religious Right lobbying, UK groups opposed to gay rights are able to cross denominational boundaries, free from some of the internal politics and dogma of particular churches.

“Serious Campaigning Groups”

What the LGCM refers to as ‘Serious Campaigning Groups’ (Gill 1989, 45-58) are regarded as the most resourceful enemy to the cause of gay rights. These groups are

¹⁶ 2001 *LGCM Briefing on Homosexuality and Christianity*, pamphlet.

usually registered as companies and charities with a large and easily mobilized support base. Each group has set out to combat what it sees as increasing moral decline in the UK. They have mobilized themselves for pluralist politics and thus accept the legitimacy of democratic politics and processes to further their aims.

The Christian Institute, whose activities and proclamations have been briefly noted above, is merely one organization that has mobilized against the gay rights cause. According to its mission statement it exists for "the furtherance and promotion of the Christian religion in the United Kingdom" and "the advancement of education".¹⁷ There are a number of other groups, often different in their purpose and ethos, that take an anti-gay rights platform. Perhaps the most significant is the Evangelical Alliance (EA). Founded in 1846, it constitutes the oldest alliance of evangelical Christians in the world and the largest body serving evangelical Christians in the UK, boasting a membership including denominations, churches, organizations and individuals. The claim of the EA¹⁸ is that the organization was itself "born out of the fight for civil liberties". The EA claims to be:

...part of a movement "uniting to change society"....[and] acts as an evangelical voice to the state, society and the wider church....The Alliance speaks on behalf of its members and represents evangelical concerns to Government, the National Assemblies, the media and key decision-makers....resourcing its members and encouraging Christians to fully engage in their communities as responsible citizens....

A further constituency of note is Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) which purports to be "...a well-established mainstream Christian charity providing resources and helping to bring Christian insight and experience to matters of public policy and practical caring initiatives".¹⁹ CARE's "vision" is to see "the transformation of society into one that has a greater respect for the sanctity and value of human life from fertilisation to its natural end". This includes working towards a society that, among other alleged virtues, "honours the family as the foundation of a stable society" and "actively supports and encourages marriage between a man and a woman". CARE's goals include "Promot(ing) Christian action, research and education to support children, single people, marriage and family life effectively" and "...Challenge Christians to become actively involved in the democratic process, to be effective salt and light where there is a need for truth and justice".²⁰

Such groups are keen to produce web-sites and literature to promote their views on "rights", lead campaigns and highlight particular cases related to gay rights or cases in which such rights are seen as negating other rights. Several examples relating to these groupings will inform the rest of this paper. Their rhetoric of rights will be discussed under the over-lapping headings of "religious liberties", "freedom of speech", "sexual rights" and the "rights of the family".

"The Threat to Religious Liberties"

¹⁷ <http://www.christian.org.uk/whoweare/index.htm> (accessed March 21, 2008).

¹⁸ Response from The Evangelical Alliance to *Getting Equal: Proposals to Outlaw Sexual Orientation Discrimination in the Provision of Goods and Services* <http://www.eauk.org/public-affairs/humanrights> (accessed March 28, 2008).

¹⁹ <http://www.care.org.uk/Group/Group.aspx?id=10604> (accessed March 28, 2008).

²⁰ <http://www.care.org.uk/Publisher/Article.aspx?id=110635> (accessed March 28, 2008).

Organizations such as the CI view the extension of gay rights as an erosion of religious liberties and utilize the language of rights in other areas with statements including “religious freedom under threat” to address issues related to Christian education in schools. Groupings like the EA also have spoken in terms of civil, human and religious rights in their lobbying for the legalized extension of Christian radio and television in the UK.²¹ In regard to gay rights, the CI has declared that “Creating legal rights based on ‘sexual rights’ has a unique capacity to clash with the rights of religious groups”.²²

In the CI’s magazine an article addressed the matter of religious liberties with the prospect of the 2006 Equality Act which stipulates that, apart from religious premises, it is illegal to treat homosexual differently where providing goods, facility or services.²³ Could homosexuals be refused a double bed by a Christian hotel owner? or “Should a Christian old people’s home be forced to accept two men in a civil partnership?”, the article enquired. Section 29 of the Act, it was argued, could lead to the Christian Union in Colleges and Universities being banned on grounds of freedom of speech. The article concluded by stating “...there is a very real danger that gay rights activists will seek to use the new laws to pursue Christians through the courts”.²⁴

The matter of gay rights has led to a number of significant court cases highlighted by the anti-gay rights lobbies. In September, 2007, the Belfast High Court ruled against the Northern Ireland Sexual Orientation Regulations. This followed a case brought by the CI and supported by a number of other Christian bodies in the province, while CARE had earlier campaigned against the regulations.²⁵ The judge ruled that the regulations do not apply to the National Curriculum in UK education or indeed to every action carried out by a faith group in receipt of government monies, only the specific activity for which the group receives government funding. Responding to concerns that the regulations could be used to force a Christian printer to print material promoting gay relationships, the judge suggested a Christian could refuse to carry out work for someone on the grounds they were gay and refuse to print material if its content violated their religious faith. Colin Hart, Director of the CI, stated:

We are taking this legal action to protect religious freedom. I believe these regulations discriminate against Christians on the basis of their religious beliefs on sexual ethics.²⁶

In early 2008, the CI published an article on the implications of recent gay rights legislation.²⁷ The Diocese of Hereford was ordered to pay £47,000 in compensation to a man who was turned down for a job as a youth worker because of his gay lifestyle in 2007. John Reaney, supported by a number of Christian anti-gay rights groups,

²¹ Hunt forthcoming.

²² *Christian Institute Magazine*, April, 2006, 2.

²³ ‘New Threat to Religious Freedom’, *Christian Institute magazine*, April 2006, 1.

²⁴ ‘New Threat to Religious Freedom’, *Christian Institute magazine*, April 2006, 1.

²⁵ Religious Liberty: Good News from Northern Ireland Care web-site article, <http://www.care.org.uk/Publisher/Article.aspx?ID=90793> (accessed March 27, 2008).

²⁶ New Releases, Monday 4 June, 2007, ‘Gay rights’ regulations restrict religious liberty, High Court hears’, http://www.christian.org.uk/pressreleases/2007/june_04_2007.htm (accessed March 28, 2008).

²⁷ £47,000 fine for Bishop sued by homosexual youth worker, http://www.christian.org.uk/issues/2008/rellib/bphereford_12feb08.htm (accessed March 27, 2008).

brought the Diocese to an employment tribunal after being questioned by the Bishop of Hereford about his sexuality during a job interview. The tribunal found that Reaney, whose claim was funded by the gay campaign group Stonewall, had been wrongly discriminated against on the grounds of sexual orientation. Stonewall claimed the tribunal should require the Bishop of Hereford, the Rt Revd Anthony Priddis, to undergo equal opportunities training which the group offered to provide. The case was decided under 2003 laws banning sexual orientation discrimination in employment. Strong conservative Christian opposition to the introduction of the legislation led to an exemption to protect appointments by churches and religious organizations. The tribunal rejected Stonewall's assertion that this exemption only applied to church ministers, and ruled that churches could also require a youth worker to adhere to their doctrines on marriage and celibacy. The tribunal also found that a church could refuse to appoint a practicing gay if a significant number of church members objected.

A further article carried by the CI, that identifies gay rights as being in opposition to religious liberties, relates how several adoption and childcare specialists were threatened with dismissal from their jobs for deciding not to place children with gay couples which is now permitted under UK law.²⁸ Norah Ellis and Dawn Jackson were threatened with dismissal from Sefton Council. Both stressed that their opposition to homosexual adoption was based on their rights as professional practitioners as well as Christian conviction.

The CI has occasionally strayed into the area of transgendered sexuality in relation to religious rights. In an article it relates how the UK government had “postponed a Parliamentary debate on new transgendered sexual discrimination laws which impact on religious liberty” and that “The delay gives more time for religious liberty concerns to be raised”.²⁹ The regulations include a harassment provision which could lead to Christians being sued for expressing their religious beliefs on transgendered sexuality in some circumstances. Other measures mean that faith-based adoption agencies could face legal action for refusing to place children in a household headed by a transgendered person.

“The Threat to Freedom of Speech”

Anti-gay rights Christian groups have also campaigned more broadly on the issue of freedom of speech. In an article, the CI reported that several members of the House of Lords voiced serious concerns about the Government's proposed “incitement to homophobic hatred” offence.³⁰ The planned legislation was contained in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill (2006-08). In a response the Bishop of Manchester told the House of Lords: “The churches are concerned that the offence should clearly exclude from its scope the expression of traditional Christian teaching about human sexuality, marriage and the family, and consequent criticism of particular forms of behaviour or lifestyle”.....“frankly, freedom to advance those convictions is part of life in a free society....”, he added. Lord Waddington, the CI reported, echoed the Bishop's concerns: “The clause cries out for amendment to protect the right to free speech”. Former Labour whip, Lord Stoddard of Swindon, also expressed concern at

²⁸ http://www.christian.org.uk/rel_liberties/cases/roberts.htm (accessed 14 May, 2008).

²⁹ http://www.christian.org.uk/html-publications/pub_homosexualrights.htm (accessed 14 May, 2008).

³⁰ Lords say 'gay hate' law, is a threat to free speech,
http://www.christian.org.uk/issues/2007/gay_rights/hatecrime/lords2read_23jan08.htm (accessed March 31 2008).

the absence of a free speech protection from the proposed law, and criticised the “undue influence that Stonewall, the main proponent of the offence, appeared to have on Government policy”. He accused the group of “demanding not equality, which we all agree with, but privilege”. Existing offences, the CI argues, are sufficient to protect homosexuals from any violence or harassment: a “homophobic hatred” law, in any form, could be used as a pretext for challenging the free speech and religious liberty of Christians.

Yet another article by the CI details how, in 2005 a Christian couple were ‘interrogated’ by police because they complained about their local council's “gay rights” policy.³¹ The police claimed that they were responding to a reported “homophobic incident”. The complaint focused on the council’s policies which included making pro-homosexual literature available in public buildings. Joe and Helen Roberts, so the article relates, asked if Christian literature could be provided next to gay rights brochures, but were told otherwise, because it may offend homosexuals.

The EA has come out strongly with opinions on the Discrimination Law Review (DLR)³² through its Public Affairs Department that lobbied the UK Government. The DLR, as noted above, extends equality law provisions to cover anything that could be described as “goods or services”. In the view of the EA, unless conscience safeguards are included, churches and religious groups may fall foul of the law if they sought to place restrictions (based on religious conscience) on the use of their facilities or services they may offer to the community. The EA advanced the view that in a government document which proposes exemptions to the regulations for several different groups, relevant exceptions for religious groups are entirely appropriate to enable them to continue to function in accordance with their ethos.

The EA’s view in overall response to the government’s “Getting Equal” Consultation is worth quoting at length:

It should be clearly understood that our difficulties in relation to homosexuality are quite different and they have nothing to do with homophobia. Our focus is not on the human beings who experience same-sex attraction but on homosexual *practice*, which we regard as a behaviour choice, together with associated attempts to normalise it. It should be emphasised at the same time that most Christians strongly question assumptions that homosexuality/ same-sex attraction (as with religion and belief) falls into the same category as race, sex and disability. The latter are manifestly either innate or outside human control, whilst homosexual practice is not. We are persuaded that there is no serious objective scientific evidence to support the frequently advocated hypothesis that same-sex attraction is innate and inevitable.The Government therefore needs to appreciate the careful distinctions applied by religious groups to this issue, based on both religious belief and objective fact, if it wishes to correctly understand and represent their views, rather than risk perpetuating the distortions and misinformation that are regularly propounded....We are concerned that as a result of proposals to *outlaw* discrimination against people on the grounds of sexual orientation, they will actually end up *requiring* discrimination against people on grounds of religion and belief.

“The Threat to the Family”

³¹ Couple quizzed by police for complaining about 'gay rights', http://www.christian.org.uk/rel_liberties/cases/roberts.htm (accessed March 28, 2008)

³² Discrimination Law Review, <http://www.eauk.org/public-affairs/humanrights> (accessed March 24 2008).

The CI, while claiming to be “eager that the rights of minorities should be protected”, extends this to the rights of children to be protected “by preventing the promotion of homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality”.³³ Similarly, the rights of the family are advanced “by showing children the centrality of marriage and the family to the fabric of society”.³⁴ In this vein, the CI has pulled attention to the Archbishop of York’s speech against Government plans to make it easier for lesbian couples to become parents through IVF.

The Government's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill (2007-08) includes provisions to recognise a lesbian couple as a child's legal parents and removes the legal requirement to consider the child's “need for a father”. The CI reported Archbishop, Dr John Sentamu, who told the House of Lords: “The right of a prospective parent to have a child by any means necessary must not triumph over the welfare of children brought into the world”. He added: “The child's right not to be deliberately deprived of a father is greater than any right to commission a child by IVF”. The CI detailed how Baroness Williams of Crosby warned “Unless we give men a full sense of what it is to be a father, a member of a family, and a proud and in many ways very rich potential, we will simply find ourselves with more and more dysfunctional families”.

The EA has commented on the content of Content of Civil Marriage Ceremonies.³⁵ The organization had previously responded in October, 2003, to the General Register Office consultation on the Civil Registration of Births Marriage and Deaths, Civil Registration: Delivering Vital Change. In a statement the EA concluded “these proposals constituted ‘controversial legislation’”. Along with CARE, the EA proposals outlined in the consultation document advocated extending the right to use some religious language watered down the uniqueness, clarity and definition of Christian marriage that was guaranteed by Government when producing the Civil Partnerships Bill (now the Civil Partnerships Act). Another concern was in regard to the Civil Registration consultation which included aspects relating to the recording of the birth or biological sex of the couples seeking civil marriage or partnership. Unease has also extended to the possibility of the religious content of civil partnership ceremonies:

If potential civil partners do not think the content of civil marriage ceremonies is “religious” enough they have the option of conducting their wedding in a church. With the current proposals, the crucial, guaranteed original distinction between civil marriage and religious marriage is being blurred and religious marriage watered down. We unreservedly oppose this creeping subversion of marriage.³⁶

“Sexual Discrimination”

³³ Archbishop says embryo Bill undermines fathers, http://www.christian.org.uk/issues/2007/hte_bill/archbishop_20nov07.htm. (accessed March 23, 2008).

³⁴ (n.d.a; see also Calvert 1997: 4).

³⁵ Content of Civil Marriage Ceremonies <http://www.eauk.org/public-affairs/marriageandfamily/> (accessed October 7, 2005).

³⁶ <http://www.eauk.org/public-affairs/humanrights/> (accessed March 23, 2008).

Finally, the CI, alongside other such groupings, have attempted to turn the tables on the gay rights movements by appealing to the matter of sexual discrimination.³⁷ For example, the CI points to a married couple who won the first round in a tribunal action against employers who categorised their marital status with civil partnerships. The Civil Partnership Act came into force in Scotland in 2005, following ministerial assurances that the new partnerships would not be equated with marriage. Lucille and Frank McQuade complained after Strathclyde Police began recording employees' marital status as “married/civil partnership”, rather than identifying married status separately. The McQuades, who are Roman Catholics, were both employed by the force. They stated their employer's decision to record their marital status as “married/civil partnership” represented both religious and sex discrimination. Mrs McQuade allegedly complained that “The concept of homosexuality is not compatible with our faith”, adding: “We find it offensive that people don't know if we are married or civil partners”.

Summary

Goode and Ben-Yahuda (1994) consider social movements in liberal democracies as moral communities in as much as they seek to have their values and ideologies accepted by wider society. Such movements seek public acceptance and this process of legitimation also includes another dimension: the negative labelling or "deviantization" of rival movements. In short, the competing moral systems of pluralist groups, whether religious or secular, will frequently attempt to apply a deviant label to others and in doing so both legitimize their own worldview for internal consumption and convince external agencies of their truth claims.

The application of such a theoretical framework in providing an understanding the relative success of the lesbian and gay Christian constituency, in as much that it is a social movement, is fruitful and allows us to appreciate the dynamics involved in the growth and increasing legitimization of the LGCM. The dynamics are partly related to the internal debate regarding gay sexuality in the churches and partly the matter of gay rights in the secular sphere.

Perhaps no other debate in recent times, apart from women's ordination, has divided the Christian community as much as that of gay rights. The measure of the controversy is cogently put by Robert Nugent and Jeannine Gramick who state: "Homosexuality may be compared to a fishbone caught in the church's throat that the church can neither eject nor swallow entirely" (1986, p.1). In terms of the extension of their rights and opportunities, the Christian Church, along with the military, has proved to be one of the last bastions resisting the extension of rights within their structures (Davies 1975; Chester and Peel 1976). There are more than theological matters to be observed in this dilemma: the wider secular extension of gay rights.

In concert with other elements of the broader gay liberation movement from the 1970s, gay and lesbian Christians have sought to organize and mobilize in order to protect and extend their rights. In turn, they have been opposed by the conservative Christian constituency that is frequently organized in permanent pressure groups with a two-pronged counter attack based on religious and moral tenets: the opposition to

³⁷ Married couple win first round in 'civil partnerships' dispute Christian institute, http://www.christian.org.uk/issues/2008/family/mcquade_11mar08.htm (accessed March 24 2008).

equal rights within the churches, as well as the extension of rights in secular society as enshrined in UK Parliamentary law and/or the rulings of the European Parliament and Court of Human Rights. The activities of the LGCM and those of its opponents, as religious constituencies, exemplify the increasing “internal” secularization” of the Christian Church in the UK. At the same time they are moral communities struggling to advance their cause. In particular, it is the negative labelling of the opposition, especially when it is amplified by public opinion, which itself becomes a moral “resource” in the pluralist struggle.

In battling for what both parties interpret as “rights” the LGCM and its opponents have found liberal democracies ideal arenas to promote the struggle to legitimate competing moralities. At the same time, such “moral” groups have sought to establish their own distinctive identity and establish moral boundaries by which they are able to differentiate themselves from rival communities and interests. In short, part of the outcome of pluralist politics is for such parties to establish a positive image for the state and its legislative authorities and to win over public opinion.

Within their church communities religious conservatives have largely blocked the full participation of openly gay and lesbian believers in virtually every denomination. The anti-gay Christian gay movement in the secular sphere could also claim a level of success. To some extent this is because, unlike their adversaries, the conservative factions are not single-issues groups. This has advantages in that gay sexuality can be addressed alongside what may broadly be perceived as public threats including abortion, pornography, and the breakdown of the family. On the other hand, the LGCM is more focused and pours all of its resources into promoting one issue. This has enhanced the movement's sense of cohesion that could have otherwise been weakened by simultaneously advancing other liberal causes such as the ordination of women clergy.

There is something more fundamental to consider. In many ways, the aim of the conservative sector to bring a religious revival and reversal of the permissive, materialistic and individualistic society that has evolved from the 1960s seems unrealistic. Reforms are not easy to repeal wholesale. Moreover, most politicians in the UK have little interest in the religious lobby. The attempts of the Christian conservatives to influence the outcome of general elections, over some three decades, by appealing to religious moralism have proved ineffectual. In part, this may be because conservative Christians are operating within an increasingly secular society. Yet, in attempting to mobilize support for their goals religious organizations are less effective than secular organizations because of their tendency to follow vague, universal, and usually moral goals which, in many respects, are often abstract, unattainable, and unwinnable.

Perhaps above all, the cause of the LGCM is much in accordance with developments in the political world in that the enhancement of gay rights is seen in increasing liberal legislation. This means that conservative Christian groups within the Church at large are in a difficult, if not unsustainable position. In forging public opinion, as much as reflecting it, the UK state is a powerful determinant especially when it has to fall in line with the recommendations of international agencies such as the European Community. Ultimately, the pressure by the LGCM for the churches to fully accept gay and lesbian orientation as legitimate may be successful. Rather ironically, that victory may not come through the activities of the LGCM or similar movements but via the legal requirements of secular society and public opinion that will identify the Christian Church as out of line with the culture and ethos of the modern world.

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