

THE RHETORIC OF RIGHTS IN THE UK CHRISTIAN CHURCHES REGARDING NON-HETEROSEXUAL CITIZENSHIP

Abstract

One of the major deliberations, indeed source of conflict, within and between Christian churches across the globe is what might be termed the 'gay debate'. This debate is not merely related to the legitimacy of civil marriages, gay clergy, alongside the broader issue of the citizenship and well-being of gay people within the churches, but has expanded to embrace other forms of non-heterosexuality, including bi-sexuality and transgenderism/sexuality and issues regarding their natures. The debate has also been impacted by matters of secular civil rights and the human rights upon which they are contingent. Christian churches, alongside additional faith communities, are now forced to confront legislation that increasingly sanctions matters of citizenship and equality for non-heterosexual people in the wider social context. This paper considers the major Christian debates in the UK and how both those sympathetic to the cause of gay rights and those opposed are forced to integrate the rhetoric of rights into their respective platforms. Analysis includes examination of the contestation between those advancing such rights on the one hand, and those who oppose them on the basis of religious morality and conscience, in short, religious rights, on the other.

Key Words: Christianity, Churches, Human Rights, LGBT Politics, Moral campaigns.

Introduction

Over three decades ago Nugent and Gramick utilised a pertinent analogy to illustrate the intensifying furore in the Christian world over what has come to be colloquially dubbed the 'gay issue'. As a result of extending rights of gay men and growing evidence of the 'naturalness' of their sexual disposition, homosexuality was likened to a fish hook caught in the gullet of the Church that it could neither entirely swallow nor spit out (Nugent and Gramick, 1989: 29-42). In short, the subject could not be ignored or summarily dismissed. By the end of the 1980s the subject of male homosexuality, if not other forms of non-heterosexuality, had gained a greater sense of urgency in the mainstream Christian denominations, at least in the Western world. Much was exemplified by the statement of the General Board of the United Methodist Church, the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States, which described the matter

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as 'One of the grave, pain-filled issues of our time'.²

Issues around gay rights are related to a cluster of topics that Christian churches have been forced to respond to on moral grounds and felt necessary to embrace as part of what David Lyon has dubbed 'body politics' which includes genetic engineering (to which can be added issues connected to assisted reproduction) and abortion (Lyon, 2000: 47). All have proved particularly troublesome to the more conservative orientated churches who have found themselves at odds with the liberal democratic ethos and the changing legislative landscape where a range of sexual and reproductive rights are increasingly wedded to expanding definitions of citizenship. Such rights, as Bryan Turner points out, are connected to the increasing literal embodiment of rights: those pertaining to the human body and natural processes (Turner, 1995). Previously, 'the physiology of the citizen' - the 'present-centred' body - was politically exiled from the realm of rights but subsequently brought to the fore in recent times. In short, there is an increasing tendency to promote the universal application of human rights or transnational ethical responsibility to what is presently fixated by the body and which depicts human beings as locked within compressed physical entities (Chowers, 2002).

The emphasis on rights in relation to the body would seem to be exemplified by the growing field of non-heterosexual rights and these rights have become increasingly enshrined in international law (Sanders, 2002; Tahmindjis, 2005). In the context of the UK conservative Christian campaigning has been stepped up a pace on religious and moral grounds in response to expanding liberal legislation and social agendas wrought by the state at least partially in the light of global developments. Such campaigning, however, has tended not to have been indulged in by mainstream denominations or individual churches. Rather, as detailed below, campaigning has rather been the preserve of conservative 'causes' groups that represent independent churches, organizations and individuals. In turn these groupings have met with opposition by parallel Christian groups advancing lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) rights and supported by individuals and sympathetic caucuses in various denominations.

The development to which such 'cause' groups have responded are the 'progressive' laws enacted to enhance the rights and citizenship in the UK of not merely gay people but other non-heterosexual categories such as the transgendered. The New Right Conservative administrations gave way to legislation enacted by successive Labour governments in the first decade of the twenty-first century under pressure from the aggressive secular LGBT lobby. The *Employment Equality Regulations* (2003), *Gender Recognition Act* (2004), and *Equality Act* (Sexual Orientation Regulations) (2007), for instance, collectively promote sexual equality and tackle discrimination in areas including adoption, employment, gender reassignment, and assisted human reproduction. Other important legislative enactments, including the *Adoption and Children Act* (2002) and *Civil Partnership Act* (2004), secured non-heterosexual rights in terms of parenthood and family life. These various pieces of legislation brought the UK into line with legislative advances enacted elsewhere in Western Europe as well as various international protocols.

Despite their quietude in relation to LGBT rights issues, UK churches, including

2 United Methodist Church, Christian Social Action 1, January, 1988, 6-9.

many mainstream churches, remain out of line with such legislative enactments and the repercussion for not doing so are only beginning to be observed. Simultaneously, the on-going debate within many of churches entails a wide range of related rights: whether non-heterosexual people should hold ministerial office and leadership position, or whether churches should conduct civil ceremonies. Many of these contended areas are also impacted by the legislative rulings mentioned above. More widely, the on-going deliberations focus on the related issue of the nature of homosexuality, whether it is innately genetic or 'nurtured' - constituting a life-style choice; and the consequences of these contrasting views for gay rights continues (Hunt, 2009).

The extension of secular gay rights legislation in the UK provides an essential dilemma for Christian churches. In particular, the *Employment Equality Act* of 2003 includes the Sexual Orientation Regulations which prohibit direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, and discrimination by way of victimisation or harassment in the workplace on the grounds of sexual orientation and this has implications for religious communities. While legislation has taken into account aspects of religious rights, such as that restricting the provision of goods, facilities or services by a Christian minister in performance of duties (*The Equality Act [Sexual Orientation]] Regulations* 2007, 14, 4 (c)), sources of discord and debate remain and raise further questions as to whether Christians, and indeed members of other faith traditions, should be exempt from future legislation on the grounds of religious rights and moral conscience. These exemption clauses are seemingly becoming almost an obsession with some UK churches, generating what Doe and Sandberg (2007) interpret as tantamount to a moral panic given that such exemptions have long previously informed legislative enactment of various kinds.

The debate in the churches in the UK around the subject of homosexuality has intensified over the last two decades with profound repercussions which, in turn, overstepped in some cases into the international sphere. This is most obvious so within the Church of England, the largest Christian denomination, which is part of the wider Anglican Communion even if it is the originator of that communion. During its thirteenth Lambeth Conference in 1998 a resolution was passed, by a vote of 526 (for) with 70 (against), confirming the traditional view that homosexual acts are 'incompatible with Scripture'.³ However, the resolution also contained a statement declaring that the policy would not be the final word and research would continue on the subject, given that Lambeth resolutions are not binding on member churches of the Communion. Controversy erupted again in 2003 with the ordination of the first openly gay bishop, Gene Robinson, in the New Hampshire diocese of the Episcopal Church in the USA. In the same year the Church announced the appointment of the Suffragan Bishop of Reading, Jeffrey John, a priest living in a celibate same-sex partnership. Under pressure from conservative Anglicans John was forced to step down before he was elected.⁴

As of 2004, Anglican provinces such as those in Brazil, Canada, Mexico and South Africa came to accept the ordination of non-celibate gay clergy as well as the blessing of same-sex unions. As a result of such developments, the Lambeth Commission on Communion issued the so-called Winsor Report on the issue of homosexuality. The re-

³ Lambeth Conference 1998 Archives.

⁴ He was later appointed as the Dean of St. Albans instead.

port reiterated the Church's strident position against homosexual practice but nonetheless recommended a moratorium on further consecration of actively gay bishops and blessings of same-sex unions. Responding to liberal developments elsewhere, many provinces, primarily from Western and Central Africa, and Australia (in total representing some 50 percent of the 80 million practicing Anglicans worldwide), declared a state of compromised communion with their counterparts who were sympathetic to the 'gay cause'. In the summer of 2008 over a thousand conservative Anglicans - many from Majority World countries - met in Jerusalem at the Global Anglican Future Conference (Gafcon) to create a global network to combat modernist trends in the church which the ordination of gay clergy epitomised.

Despite the much publicised controversies in the Anglican Church in the UK, other denominations and churches, notwithstanding 'internal' debates, have largely avoided polarised views, splits and acrimony. A principal reason for this is that, for the most part at least, they have softened some of their traditional entrenched attitudes towards homosexuality, sometimes opening the matter to discussion and at other times avoiding the subject altogether because of its inherent sensitivities. Arguably the more moderate stance is in response to increasing scientific proof of the 'naturalness' of non-heterosexuality and the complexities of human sexuality in general. In this respect much was exemplified by the statement issued at the 1993 Methodist Church of Great Britain's (the second largest denomination) annual conference in which the denomination called for 'Methodist people to begin a pilgrimage of faith' in order to understand more by way of human sexuality.⁵ Such pilgrimages of faith into understanding the nature of non-heterosexuality continues in many denominations. Nonetheless, the matter of LGBT rights in the secular world and how they have impacted Christian constituencies has ensured that it remains a constant item on the agenda.

The Rhetoric of Rights

The Christian churches and 'cause' groups in the UK, the national context that will inform this paper, are not only forced to confront the expanding area of non-heterosexual rights (some of which have legal implications for religious organizations), but have themselves internalised the ethos of rights. A survey of the statements announced by various denominations show how the rights programme has been taken on board. Resolution 6 of the 1993 Methodist Church of Great Britain's annual conference makes reference to combating 'repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality'.⁶ Similarly, the Baptist Union of Great Britain (the third largest denomination) while seemingly leaving views regarding homosexuality as a matter of individual religious conscience for its members, holds that same sex couples 'should not suffer discrimination because of their sexual orientation'.⁷

The Catholic Church, also part of a wider Christian community but very much a minority religious constituency in the UK, has largely endorsed the Vatican's official posi-

⁵ Human Sexuality, The Methodist Church of Great Britain.

⁶ The 1993 Methodist Church of Great Britain's annual conference.

⁷ Issues raised by the Equality Act, BUGB.

tion regarding homosexuality which condemns the non-heterosexual act - a position given increasing endorsement by the last two Papacies. However, the Church has mellowed its views on the subject. It now argues that homosexual desires or attractions are not necessarily in themselves sinful. Nonetheless, they are said to be pathologically disordered. The Church, moreover, embraces a rhetoric of rights through its Catechism stating that '...men women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies...must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided'.⁸

The adoption of the rhetoric of rights by mainstream Christian denominations in the UK, as in other Western countries, is by no means restricted to gay rights, but informs broader issues in Christian social activism. In a secular world this allows an engagement with issues of equality and justice that are deeply rooted in the faith itself and are easy to reconcile with Christian foundational aspects of human and civil rights. More pragmatically, they afford a cloak of respectability for many mainstream denominations and even conservative Christian groupings that struggle for legitimacy in the context of a post-Christian UK where they are increasingly losing influence. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of rights is also a powerful source of Christian mobilisation for those that rigorously advance and oppose gay rights in not only the churches but the public, political and legal arenas. The Anglican Church apart, the denominations in the UK have not generally provided the site for acrimonious and conflicting viewpoints. Rather, the battle has therefore tended to take place in the secular political sphere, being especially the focus of contending Christian 'cause' groups.

Conservative Christians at the beginning of the twentieth century in the UK had few reasons for launching extra-Parliamentary political campaigns given that over one hundred evangelical Members of Parliament sat in the House of Commons. However, the post-war world and the advent of the 'permissive' society changed a great deal. The UK had become an increasingly secular nation and the evangelicals lost their power base in the national Parliament. In the 1960s the Festival of Light (NFOL) arose as the most significant lobby group that gave expression to Christian moral outrage, bringing together an uneasy alliance between conservative Protestant evangelicals and Roman Catholics. The NFOL conventions and street marches protested against what was perceived as the moral degeneration of British society and the enactment of liberal legislation regarding divorce, abortion and, in 1967, the legalisation of the homosexual act. In respect of the latter, the NFOL soundly condemned the growth of what it called 'militant homosexuality' as a perversion of God-given heterosexuality. The rhetoric of rights in opposing homosexuality however tended to be muted. Rather, opposition tended to be on a moral and biblical basis.

While never entirely dormant, conservative Christian moral campaigning took on a new lease of life from the 1970s. Forming into a loosely knit coalition through several 'cause' groups and campaigns, these constituencies, much like those in the USA, were joined by an increasing number of Pentecostal and charismatic churches whose hitherto involvement in the political arena tended to be restrained (Thompson, 1997). While it is true that the Christian Right in the UK remains in few ways comparable with that of the USA and has never generated an equivalent to the Moral Majority movement

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2358.

that in one form or another become part of the so-called 'culture wars' which divided the nation (Hunter, 1991), the issues with which it has concerned itself has proved to be largely the same.

Despite the legal immunities in relation to the extending secular rights agenda, conservative Christians in the UK are forced to clarify challenging and ever-changing moral ambiguities, provide answers to new moral questions, defend traditional viewpoints and establish fresh boundaries. Above all, the connection of 'body politics' with the religious sphere point not only to questions of legitimacy and citizenship but also boundaries between the private and public life. The conservative Christian lobby has subsequently found itself fighting on two fronts: the increasingly liberal secular world on the one hand, and liberalising tendencies within many churches in the UK including their LGBT caucuses on the other.

Compared to the prevailing religious culture of the USA, UK society, like much of Western Europe, is more secular by several indexes. It has not generated a significant religious or a social base that has responded rigorously to moral issues as in the USA. Nonetheless, the Christian Right in the UK has expressed a fairly rigid moral code of traditional family values and entered into political arena on a number of body-politics issues. The early cause of the National Festival of Light seemed to be a futile and unrewarding one compared to the successes of the Christian Right of the 1970s in the US. There was no meaningful or sizeable counterpart to the direct intrusion into political campaigning. Yet this is not to underestimate some of the victories of the moral campaigns in the UK, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. This included the closure of many 'sex shops' and only restricted licenses granted to others (Thompson, 1997).

Over the last two decades such conservative Christian groupings have stepped up their political activism simply because they are forced to do so. The area of rights is perhaps most obviously the preserve of gay and lesbian caucuses within the mainstream denominations and more stringently advanced by the umbrella organization, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. On the other hand, with the demise of the moral campaigns of the FOL, a number of conservative Christian groups, some longer established than others and with differing *raison d'être*, have mobilised rights issues related to religious conviction and conscience to oppose the extension of non-heterosexual rights. Such groups, however, are not single issue groups. Rather, their anti-LGBT rights platform is merely part of a number of issues embraced such as abortion and euthanasia. These competing Christian constituencies and their adoption of the rhetoric of rights will now be examined with reference to the principal groupings involved.

The LGBT Christian Constituencies

One source of refuge for lesbian and gay Christians is the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, a confederation of congregations representing non-heterosexuals but which is by no means exclusive of individuals of all sex-

ual orientations. In its theological disposition the UFMCC is perhaps best described as Protestant, liberal and ecumenical. The 'about us' international web-page of the UFMCC commences with the statement the 'UFMCC is at the vanguard of civil and human rights movements....'⁹ Founded by Rev. Troy Perry in 1968¹⁰ in Los Angeles, it has around 250 member congregations in 23 countries, including ten churches in the UK. As elsewhere, those in the UK advance not only the platform of LGBT rights but a wider agenda of social activism including the extension of a range of rights in an international context. Besides the UFMCC congregations and LGBT-affirming churches in the UK, there exist LGBT caucuses in the major denominations such as Changing Attitudes (Anglican Church) and the Baptist Network Accepting Lesbian and Gay Christians, alongside cross-denominational evangelical groupings including the Accepting Evangelicals and Evangelical Fellowship for Lesbian and Gay Christians. These organizations have furthered the cause of LGBT civil rights with various levels of success, although not necessarily with their denomination's endorsement. However, the most significant constituency advancing such rights is the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM).

As the core representative body of LGBT Christians, the LGCM was established in 1976 in order to provide a common forum for a number of caucus groups from different denominations, advancing their interests in both the churches and secular world. The LGCM has appealed to wider universal principles of human rights within the framework of the extension of civil liberties, thus portraying conservative Christians as opposed to progressive secular developments. During its 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 enforce most of the homophobic abuse experienced in the UK by non-heterosexual people. It claimed that the churches have a disproportionate influence on legislation effecting gay and lesbian people and relentlessly 'tried to defy the will of parliament and the international consensus on human rights'. 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 statement¹¹ 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.

The report continued

...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....

The uncompromising tone of these statements clearly call upon the legitimacy of non-heterosexual rights advanced in the secular world and equally clearly identify

9 http://www.mccchurch.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=About_Us&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=697 (accessed April 7, 2008).

10 Perry performed same sex unions as early as 1970 and had long been active in promoting lesbian and gay rights.

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

conservative religious groups as a major source of opposition to those rights. Hence, there is an appeal to both the political world and public opinion, as well as calling upon religious rights as the foundation to non-heterosexual rights.

Conservative Christian Mobilisation

The LGCM's recourse to rights is perhaps understandable given that the underpinning liberal ethos dovetails with that of the secular world and prevailing political agendas and, as the above statement indicates, the matter of rights is extended to 'human rights in all its dimensions'. In contending the stance of the conservatives the LGCM, as the above statement more than suggests, disputes the claim of their adversaries to have a monopoly of rights pertaining to religious conviction of conscience. The reference to 'certain religious leaders' is a veiled allusion to conservative 'cause' groups which the LGBT regards as its most forceful antagonists (Gill, 1989). These groupings have become more vociferous in recent years in advancing what is viewed as traditional rights of religious conscience continually eroded in the post-Christian context of the UK and especially where they relate to objecting to non-heterosexuality. The strategy of appealing to universal rights, albeit within certain limitations, has been particularly evident as they have been increasingly forced into the political arena, confronting the activities of the LGCM in advancing LGBT rights and the general drift towards endorsing such rights in the mainstream churches,¹² alongside the broad advancement of rights in the secular sphere.

Despite their victories in the 1970s and 80s, the reality was that UK conservative Christians were unable to mobilize in sizeable numbers. Neither did they gain significant public support. The UK public tended to equate Christian moral campaigning with religious fundamentalism and fanaticism evident in the USA. Some groupings furthered particular causes without entering the political stage. This included confronting gay sexuality head-on. The organizations True Freedom Trust, the Turning Point, and Pilot, for example, follow in the footsteps of the National Festival of Light in setting up a number of agencies which claimed to 'cure' repentant gays. These groups, however, were content to use 'reparative therapy' or other techniques to 'heal' homosexuality, given that it was perceived as a pathology, rather than openly campaign politically on gay issues. Other groupings have been concerned with a cluster of moral issues of which gay sexuality is merely one. They include Facts Matter, the Conservative Christian Fellowship and the Proclamation Trust.

The 'gay issue' is important and a significant rallying point for the conservatives. Defeated and discredited by such changes as the legitimacy of female clergy they have sworn 'here and no further' in the fight against liberal tendencies in their churches. Typical is the Reform Group in the Church of England. It has produced very little by way of a policy or political platform towards gay sexuality because the subject as far as the Reformed Group is concerned is closed and settled, and no compromise deemed possible (Percy, 2005: 196-97). In short, gay sexuality for these groupings is not even an issue for debate. Thus matters of rights is not a priority. By contrast, the more overt-

¹² For example, in 2005 the annual conference The Methodist church became the first major Christian denomination in the UK to agree in principle to the prospect of blessings services for same-sex couples.

ly active groups have come to have large and easily mobilised, if small support base and include the Evangelical Alliance Christian Institute, Christian Action Research and Education, and the Maranatha Trust. A good number are registered as companies and charities. Many of those individuals subscribing to these factions are active within their churches, attempting to reverse liberal tendencies in the denominations. However, the major strategies of the more sizeable organizations are to direct activity towards reversing 'progressive' legislative enactments and changing the cluster of laws regarding non-heterosexual rights and citizenship in the UK.

The Christian Institute (CI) is one of the most prominent politically active organizations. According to its mission statement the CI exists for 'the furtherance and promotion of the Christian religion in the United Kingdom' and 'the advancement of education'.¹³ In reality it amounts to a conservative Christian 'think tank' whose self-assigned purpose is to work out policy strategies in order to lobby the political sphere. The CI, in the year 2000, was the only group to take a case to court for an alleged breach of the now repealed Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act that prevented the promotion of the awareness of homosexuality in schools. The strategy of initiating or supporting cases around homosexuality in particular has continued against the background of legislative advances.

There are also a number of other groups, often different in purpose and ethos, which take a similarly strident anti-gay rights political stance. 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'.¹⁴ In essence it is a moral campaigning group that seeks to advance and protest conventional Christian teaching in the UK. 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'.¹⁵ The organization claims to have representation in the UK Parliament, the European Community in Brussels and in the UN in Geneva and New York.¹⁶ In political issues it views itself as 'engag(ing) with the political process in regards to equality issues, particularly issues of religious freedom and human rights'.¹⁷

The most significant organization however, in terms of membership and political influence, is the Evangelical Alliance (EA). Founded in 1846, it constitutes the oldest confederation of evangelical Christians in the world and the largest body serving

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

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

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

16 <https://owa.uwe.ac.uk/CookieAuth.dll?GetLogon?reason=0&formdir=9&curl=Z2FOWAZ2F> (assessed April 23, 2010.).

17 <http://www.care.org.uk/Group/Group.aspx?ID=30233> (assessed 23rd April, 2010).

evangelical Christians in the UK, boasting a membership that includes several denominations, churches, individuals and other Christian bodies which make up some two-thirds of evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic representation. The claim of the EA is that the organization was itself 'born out of the fight for civil liberties'.¹⁸ In 2003, the Labour government as part of its policy of 'social inclusion' announced its intension of encouraging all faith groups in the decision-making process. To this end a new ministerial group was created to inject religious ideas across the UK's civil service. The Faith Community Liaison Group was established and chaired by the Home Office minister responsible for 'civil renewal', and with a wide remit. One of the most salient and controversial members of the new body is the Evangelical Alliance. Hence, the same government that had extended non-heterosexual rights in the UK was actually encouraging the involvement of influential Christian groupings that opposed such developments.

These groups have unashamedly increased their campaigning in the political arena in recent years. This has enabled them to fight on the relatively new front of public policy and to have a greater ecumenical breath and, emulating US Religious Right lobbying, work across ecumenical boundaries free from some of the internal politics and policies of a particular denomination. This is an important development. Since the mainstream Christian churches seek to avoid political controversies such as non-heterosexual rights, those factions and individuals fighting against them find the conservative 'cause' groups as the conducive means for doing so. Senior politicians have been courted by these groups, brought on side, and then offered material assistance in terms of information, researchers and consultants for policy issues on which they share a mutual concern. Both the Christian Institute and CARE operate in this way within the Houses of Commons and Lords.

The foundational principle of Christian anti-gay rights lobbying groups continues to rest on biblical 'truths' as a moral tenet over and beyond secular rights claims as this extract from a published pamphlet of The Christian Institute 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.¹⁹

Many such conservative groupings, however, have increasingly acknowledged that biblical quotes and theological arguments do not strike a chord with the public at large or politicians, even though their primary motivation remains theological. Biblical and theological language is notably present in the publications of the Christian Institute, CARE and the Evangelical Alliance. Nonetheless, this has been supplemented by the discourse of rights; primarily of religious conscience and conviction. The appeal of the conservative Christian moral activists to the secular world provides a marker as to how marginalised the conservative Christian constituency has become in the UK

¹⁸ EA web home page.

¹⁹ 2001 LGCM *Briefing on Homosexuality and Christianity*, pamphlet.

given that they are now obliged to court wider secular agencies and engage with the broader discourse on civil liberties.

Strategies of Opposition

There have been a number of strategies undertaken by anti-gay rights Christian groups that supplement their biblically-based position and support their rights agenda. The key lobbyist groups have increasingly endorsed the strategies of their opponents in order to resist them. They can no longer choose their own ground and have begun to play down the religious moralist argument and advance their cause by adopting the rhetoric of civil rights (Davies and Hunt, 1999). Christian conservative groups in the UK, similar to those in the USA, are now skilled in presenting themselves as quasi-academic or research bodies and embrace pseudo-scientific discourse. They employ staff and often carry out what is frequently referred to as 'research' into public policy areas. The use of terms such as 'research' or 'policy' in their titles suggests that these groups offer a public service and deflect attention away from their primarily religious and biblically-literal agenda. This has helped forge a new dimension of moral arguments that are often based on a number of broadly-based utilitarian principles that converge with rights issues.

The objective and serious image which the conservative Christians attempt to cultivate for themselves is backed up by the quasi-academic use of statistics. This is evident in the attempt to play 'the numbers game'. Conservative Christian organizations are keen to provide evidence that those individuals with a gay orientation constitute a much smaller minority than their opponents suggest, thus rendering them even more a deviant sexual constituency and subsequently devaluing their claims to the public acceptance of non-heterosexual rights. For instance, in 2008 the Christian Institute published an article on its web-site²⁰ quoting a Government survey suggesting that merely one in every 100 people in the UK describe themselves as homosexual.²¹ Less than one per cent said they were 'bi-sexual'. The same article also pointed to the last National Census (2001) which states there are fewer than 40,000 same-sex households (0.2 percent of the total) in England and Wales.

Secondly, statistics are offered which suggest that gay and lesbian people are not genetically predisposed towards their sexual orientation. 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 foundationalism 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. The basis of non-heterosexual rights as 'natural' is thus further undermined. It follows that Christian anti-gay rights groups seize every fragment of research evidence which support the conjecture that gay sexuality is in some way 'nurtured' or 'pathological'. The *Christian Institute Magazine*²² in 2006 carried an article entitled 'Gay Rights versus religious Rights' in

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

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

22 Christian Institute Magazine, April, 2006, 2.

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.²³

The blame for a gay orientation is consequently attributed to a sinful world where people are 'abused', where a father figure is absent, and models of homosexual behaviour are apparently rampant. 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.²⁴

At times, however, conservative Christian discourse separates the alleged pathological basis of homosexuality from sexual *activity* and there are implications here for the issue of rights. In the context of the legitimacy of non-heterosexual rights the EA's view in overall response to the UK 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.

A further strategy of note is for anti-gay rights Christian lobbyists to portray the gay cause as constituting a 'public menace' whose rights are a facade for sexual perversion. There is a tendency to link gay activist groups, including 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 historical UK law includes frequent derogative reference to 'buggery'.²⁵ Concerns about HIV since the early 1980s have also been used by

²³ Spitzer (2003).

²⁴ LGCM n.d.b: 3, quoting the Christian Institute's *Bankrolling Gay Proselytism*, 1999.

²⁵ The Christian Institute, Annual Report, 1997/8, 15.

conservatives to attack the gay community with the assertion that 'true' Christians should wish for and positively be active in revoking permissive legislation. If HIV was not God's judgment, it was at least a discernible repercussion for breaking his moral and natural laws (Gill, 1989: 66).

While the gay lobby 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 homosexual consent enjoyed little support among the UK public, pointing out that according to the British Social Attitudes findings, 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'.²⁶ Thus another plank supporting LGBT rights is thus dismantled. The CI points to the findings of opinion polls which suggest as much while simultaneously negating rights to citizenship:

...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).

Perhaps most obviously, as part of their strident rhetoric against gay rights, Christian organizations fall back on accusations of the steady erosion of religious liberties. Groupings such as the CI have declared that 'Creating legal rights based on "sexual rights" has a unique capacity to clash with the rights of religious groups'²⁷ and that the latter is increasing demoted down the hierarchy of an ever-expanding remit of rights.²⁸ Moreover, the matter of religious conscience has become enmeshed with matters of freedom of speech. In the CI's magazine an article addressed the matter of religious liberties with the prospect of the 2006 Equality Act which stipulated that, apart from religious premises, it is illegal to treat homosexual differently where providing goods, facility or services. The CI deemed that the legislation would prevent religious constituencies speaking out against such matters on the grounds of conscience.²⁹

Similarly, the EA came out with strong opinions related to the Discrimination Law Review (DLR)³⁰ through its Public Affairs Department that lobbied the UK Government, thus contending wider issues of citizenship in the context of non-heterosexual rights. 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 deemed 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 Christian ethos.

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

27 Christian Institute Magazine, April, 2006, 2.

28 <http://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/downloads/marginchristians.pdf> (assessed April 3, 2010)

29 'New Threat to Religious Freedom', Christian Institute magazine, April, 2006, 1.

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

Conclusion

This paper has sought to overview how Christian churches and groups have responding to the increasingly high profile of LGBT politics and rights both within the churches and wider UK society. Various themes have emerged. One is that the rhetoric of rights is increasingly adapted and adopted by all factions concerned. Secondly, that the legitimacy of gay rights has not (the Anglican Church apart) created splits or animosity within the majority of mainstream Christian denominations. Rather, individuals and groups within the churches, where they discernibly have strong views, have largely taken place outside of their structures in conflicting 'cause' groups. Matters of religious conviction and conscience are the platforms by which anti-gay rights lobbies have entered the political arena through political lobbying and embraced their own language of rights, especially when campaigning has failed to thwart advances in LGBT rights legislation. In turn, issues of gay rights versus rights of religious conscience have led to a number of significant court cases that are well-publicised and highlighted by rival Christian lobbies, especially when they have had a positive outcome. Such cases have including the refusal of individual Christians who are professional marriage registrars refusing to marry same-sex couples, Christian hotel owners refusing to accommodate same-sex couples, Christian care homes for the elderly refusing to implement equal rights legislation, and preaching against homosexuality generally.

The fact that the issues related to 'for' and 'against' gay rights takes place largely outside of denominational structures should not necessarily be surprising. It is evident that issues of rights are embraced by modern social movements, often in the form of 'cause' groups in the struggle for political power and public recognition in the liberal democratic environment is increasingly the respectable basis of petitioning the public and political world. Moreover, the advancement of rights has, become a legitimate resource underpinned by a paralleled rhetoric of rights appealing to state and international law (Turner, 1995: 2-3, 7-8). Nonetheless, in the contemporary world the discourse of rights relate not only to the matter of rights in terms individual liberty, of which freedom of conscience and freedom of religious conviction and expression are prime examples, but an ever expanding wide range of social and economic rights (rights to employment, housing, of consumers, health, and matters of reproduction and sexuality) that are mostly part of the broader rubric of 'human rights' (Skogly, 2001) and are also associated with broadening notions of 'citizenship' – a concept originally related to civil rights and duties, but now encompassing notions of 'social inclusion'.

More broadly, the discussion above related to the apparent contradictory religious rights of conscience on the one hand, and sexual rights on the other, raises profound questions that challenge claims to objective and universal notions of 'human rights' (Daum, 2001). It further raises issues of the ideological basis of conflicting rights and the way they are mobilised by contending social movements broadly defined. In addition, it raises issues related to the possible 'hierarchy' of rights where some rights are subjectively held as superior to others, enquiring why this should be so and what are the implications. Further, anti-gay rights lobbies such as the Christian Institute have argued that the wider agenda of equality, diversity and citizenship has largely neglected Christian constituencies.³¹

31 <http://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/downloads/marginchristians.pdf> (assessed April 3, 2010).

The freshly formulated discourse of human rights embraced by the LGBT lobby is rejected by anti-gay rights conservative Christian caucuses. The calls to religious conscience and speech are seemingly located within older and limited concepts of civil rights. A further difficulty that conservative Christian lobbies face is that while the modern state continues to recognise the legitimacy of religious rights, they are increasingly clustered, at times in legal enactments, with rights related to 'belief' and conscience broadly defined (de Jong, 2008). In turn, this may indicate the further secularisation of rights given that 'beliefs' may also constitute secular ideologies and atheistic convictions. In fact, the broad remit of 'beliefs' and 'conscience' is so broad as to legitimate any advancement of such a 'right' and furnish that claim and this is clear in numerous statements by the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and similar organizations.

Non-heterosexual human rights have been rapidly translated into a number of specific rights. Included here are rights to civil unions or same sex marriage, a development itself hedged around by legislative enactments (Franke, 2006), alongside laws related to property rights and parental rights (Clarke and Finlay, 2004) of non-heterosexual people. Non-sexual rights are also increasingly protected by the illegality of discrimination against those of non-heterosexual orientation (Dawson, 2005). Many such developments have connected to a new conceptualisation of citizenship as the original concept itself has widened, so there now exist the dimensions of 'sexual citizenship' and 'intimate citizenship' that follow earlier notions of gender and ethnic citizenship (Plummer, 2003). The LGCM and other similar constituencies readily accept and utilise such concepts. It is to this broadening of concepts of citizenship embraced concepts by pro-gay rights Christian groups, alongside the general drift of the secular world in endorsing such rights that may well secure their future victory.

Finally, the issue of non-heterosexual rights and the way that it has been debated and contended provides an exemplary marker of both the nature of politics and religion in the contemporary UK. In fact, it provides both a trajectory and catalyst for both. The UK is essentially now a post-Christian society. Conventional moralities based upon a largely cultural-bound interpretation of Christianity have broken down and are continually challenged. Christian religion is now marginalised and largely confined to the private sphere. However, political developments in the secular world, typified by the developments of non-heterosexual rights, have increasingly drawn competing Christian groups into the public arena. A measure of the increasing secularisation of the UK is that such groups have to adapt themselves to democratic processes and discourse which, to one degree or another, secularises these constituencies themselves as part of a long-term process that now seems irreversible.

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**РЕТОРИКА ПРАВА У ХРИШЋАНСКИМ ЦРКВАМА ВЕЛИКЕ БРИТАНИЈЕ У
ВЕЗИ СА НЕ-ХЕТЕРОСЕКСУЛАНИМ ГРАЂАНСКИМ ПРАВИМА**

Резиме

Једна од главних расправа, а, истина, и извора сукоба, унутар и између хришћанских цркава широм света јесте оно што би се могло назвати „геј дебатом“. Ова дебата није везана само за легитимитет цивилних бракова, геј свештенства, а заједно са ширим питањем грађанских права и добробити геј популације унутар цркава, већ обухвата и друге облике не-хетеросексуалности, укључујући ту бисексуалност и транссексуалност, као и питања у вези са њиховом природом. На расправу је такође утицало и питање секуларних грађанских права и људских права која су њима условљена. Хришћанске цркве, заједно са другим верским заједницама, сада су приморане да се супротставе закону који све више санкционише грађанска права и једнакост не-хетеросексуалних људи у ширем друштвеном контексту. Овај рад разматра главне хришћанске дебате у Великој Британији и то, како су обе, и оне наклоњене геј правима, и оне које им се противе, присиљене да интегришу реторику права у своје ставове. Анализа укључује испитивање спорења између оних који су за унапређење тих права, с једне стране, и оних који им се супротстављају на основу верског морала и савести, или укратко, верских права, с друге стране.

Кључне речи: хришћанство, цркве, људска права, ЛГБТ политика, моралне кампање.

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