

Editorial

The issue of homosexuality and its impact on the Church of England will not go away. It is now no longer a matter of closeted rumour, nor even a question of isolated scandals here and there. Now it is on the verge of becoming a major issue in Church life, which will affect everything from ordination to Church weddings. For there is a very real possibility that in the not too distant future the state will authorise legal marriage between same-sex couples, an event which, if it takes place, could rock the Church of England to its foundations.

The role of the parish priest as a registrar for marriages is an ancient one, and despite the rise in popularity of civil wedding ceremonies, it remains popular beyond the boundaries of what could reasonably be called the Church's active membership. There is no desire in the country for serious change in the current practice of Church weddings, and it is quite possible that those most directly concerned – the couples themselves – would also be the ones most resistant to any move towards making civil marriage the universal and only legal norm, as it is in many Continental countries.

Yet the prospect of legalised homosexual weddings is bound to call this arrangement into question. The main difficulty is not that parish clergy would be expected to perform them. Quite probably, if provision were to be made for this type of marriage, neither the Church nor its clergy would be expected to get involved. A similar situation prevails now in the case of the remarriage of divorced persons during the lifetime of a former partner. Such marriages are legal in common law, but as they are not acceptable to the Church's Canons, they are not normally performed by a clergyman in Church.

But there is the rub. Although it can be said that second marriages of this kind are not *normally* performed by the Church of England, there is little way of preventing a clergyman who is determined to do so from presiding at such a ceremony. It happens now and then, here and there, and generally nothing much is said about it. Indeed, there is even a growing number of clergy who have been married in this way. Now what would happen if some clergy decided that they were prepared to perform a same-sex marriage which also happened to be a legal ceremony? There are certainly some who would do it out of conviction that this is the right way to proceed. Others might be pressured into it for any number of reasons. It is also quite possible that a number of clergy would seek to enter a same-sex union themselves, and continue in their ministry on the ground that they have done nothing illegal. To say that it is uncanonical would mean

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little, because of the number who are already living in canonically irregular unions.

The Church of England has a long history of admitting change by stealth, and there is no reason to suppose that the same thing will not happen again in this case. There was a time, remember, when liturgical irregularities could land clergy, and even bishops, in court, but in spite of all the legal judgments and official pronouncements, those who defied the system eventually got their way. Much the same thing has happened on the doctrinal front as well. Nobody is surprised to hear that some prominent theologian (or bishop) has just denied a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith, and it is now generally accepted that only retirement is likely to rid the Church of the embarrassment, if embarrassment it still is. Now we have the same thing coming again, only this time on the moral issue of homosexuality.

At this point, of course, there is still strong opposition towards any moves to legalise or tolerate open homosexuality in the Church. But it has been quietly accepted in some quarters for a long time, and many people in influential positions are sympathetic to it, even if they are not themselves actively engaged in it. Lord Runcie's recent admission that he knowingly ordained practising homosexuals merely underlines the fact that the gay lobby has support in the highest circles of the Church. It is worth reflecting on the fact that before the vote to ordain women was taken, there were no women priests in England. In this case however, General Synod will merely be asked to give official approval to what is already a fairly widespread (and widely tolerated) practice. Had there been any real chance that Lord Runcie would be penalised for making such an admission, he probably would not have said anything, but as things stand, there is little danger of any form of discipline being invoked against him. Who on the episcopal bench would dare to cast the first stone?

Certainly not the evangelical bishops, one of whom has agreed to speak at a London rally of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in November 1996. Once again, we fear that this reflects that lack of biblically-based conviction (and practical determination) in the broader evangelical constituency which has come to be dignified as 'openness'. Evangelicals in general are fairly solidly against homosexual practice, but then they were fairly solidly against denials of the Resurrection and the Virgin Birth of Christ, and how much good did that do? In the final analysis, evangelical opposition may well be ignored, especially if the state lends a helping hand and offers the pro-homosexual lobby a way forward for their case. It would be relatively easy to portray Evangelicals as fundamentalist homophobes (just as they were sometimes portrayed as misogynists, in the debate over the ordination of women), and for many,

that would seal the argument in favour of the homosexual case. Those Evangelicals who (rightly) do not want to be portrayed in that way would be faced with a choice of either persisting in their opposition, which would probably drive them into a corner where they would not want to be, or conceding some ground to the pro-homosexual lobby. And of course, once that happened, the floodgates would be open.

What we are faced with here is nothing less than a make-or-break issue for Evangelicals within the Church of England. Is there any way that we can unite to defend biblical standards of sexual conduct and marriage, and make those standards prevail in the Church (and in society) at large? Or are we condemned, once again, to be reduced to the status of a noisy but ineffective minority, objecting in principle to what we cannot prevent in practice? At no time in the recent past has the choice before us been as stark as it is now, or the danger greater. We must start praying – and praying hard – that God will give us the strength to stand up for our convictions, and to prevail against the forces of chaos and destruction which are trying, often in the name of love and compassion, to destroy our society.

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