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# **You can't argue with God: Religious opposition to same-sex marriage in Britain**

Steven Kettell  
Department of Politics and International Studies  
University of Warwick  
s.kettell@warwick.ac.uk

## **Abstract**

Secularisation remains a central but contested topic within the social sciences. Much of the debate around this concept has focused on how, to what extent and under what conditions processes of secularisation might, or might not, be active. One aspect that has remained relatively under-explored in these debates has been the impact of secularisation on the public discourse of religious actors. This article explores these issues through an analysis of religious opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Britain. It shows that religious public discourse on this subject was characterised by the use of overtly secular (as opposed to theological) arguments, denoting a strategic shift in response to changes in the landscape of religion and belief.

## **Keywords**

Secularisation, public discourse, same-sex marriage, religious groups

## **Introduction**

Secularisation remains a central but contested topic within the social sciences. The concept dates back to some of the earliest theorists of religion, such as Karl Marx and August Comte, and encompasses a multi-dimensional theoretical approach, described by Phillip Gorski as a 'secularisation paradigm' as opposed to a singular thesis.<sup>1</sup> At the core of this approach lies the idea that religion is in a (potentially terminal) state of decline. This extends across multiple dimensions of religiosity, such as membership of religious organisations, attendance at places of worship and personal beliefs in God, and is associated with a range of causal dynamics linked to the onset of modernity. These include the rise of the natural sciences

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Gorski, "Historicizing the secularization debate: church, state and society in late medieval and early modern Europe, ca.1300 to 1700", *American Sociological Review*, 65 no.1 (2000): 138-67; also see Sharon Hanson, "The secularisation thesis: talking at cross purposes", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 12 no.2 (1997): 159-79.

(which have displaced religious explanations about the workings of the natural world), the functional differentiation of the state (which has progressively de-coupled religious organisations from their role as welfare providers), the growth of cultural diversity (undermining religious claims to universal truth) and the role of existential security (with control over the natural and social environment supplanting the need for religious certainties).<sup>2</sup>

Advocates of secularisation theory point to a range of statistics on measures such as membership and belief to support the claim that the social, cultural and political importance of religion is decreasing. Critics, however, highlight a variety of conceptual and empirical problems. These include the assertion that secularisation is being eroded (or even reversed) by a ‘return of religion’ to public life, notions about the emergence of ‘post-secular’ societies and the claim that religion is undergoing a change in form – shifting from organised to more informal, individualised varieties – rather than experiencing a linear trend of decline.<sup>3</sup>

Research into the impact of secularisation on religious actors has suggested that these processes can serve as a driver for more conservative forms of religion (including religious fundamentalism) and lead to vigorous attempts at re-asserting a role for faith in the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> One aspect that has been relatively under-examined in these debates, however, has

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<sup>2</sup> For selected examples see David Voas and Mark Chaves, “Is the United States a counterexample to the secularisation thesis?” *American Journal of Sociology*, 121 no.5 (2016): 1517-56; Clive Field, “Another window on British secularization: public attitudes to church and clergy since the 1960s”, *Contemporary British History*, 28, no.2 (2014): 190-218; Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London, Routledge, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> On these points see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994); Titus Hjelm (ed.) *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World* (London, Penguin, 2009); Philip Gorski and Ates Altinordu, “After secularisation?” *American Review of Sociology*, 34 (2008): 55-85; Cesare Merlini, “A post-secular world?” *Survival*, 53 no.2 (2011): 117-130.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Peter Achterberg, Dick Houtman, Stef Aupers, Wellem de Koster, Peter Mascini and Jeroen van der Waal, “A Christian cancellation of the secularist truce? Waning Christian religiosity and waxing religious deprivatisation in the West”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48 no.4 (2009): 687-701; Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, “Secularization and the wider gap in values and personal religiosity between the religious and nonreligious”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 55 no.4 (2016): 717–736; Steven

been the impact of secularisation on the public discourse of religious actors. Public discourse forms one of the principal means by which religious actors can seek to promote and justify their views on social and political issues, and to try and shape wider opinion within the public sphere. In recent years religious actors have made a number of high-profile and often controversial interventions in a range of public debates, covering themes such as the limits of free speech, reproductive rights, assisted dying and social cohesion.<sup>5</sup> This article explores this topic through the lens of religious opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Britain. This provides an interesting test case, not least because attitudes towards homosexuality are closely linked to theological beliefs and levels of religiosity.<sup>6</sup> While variation between and within religions exists (Muslims and evangelical Christians have been found to hold more conservative views than Buddhists and Hindus, for instance), the general trend is clear. As Whitley Jr explains: ‘most forms of religiosity ... are related in varying degrees to negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men’.<sup>7</sup> And as Jackle and Wenzelburger

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Kettell, “The militant strain: an analysis of anti-secular discourse in Britain”, *Political Studies*, 6 no.3 (2015): 512-528.

<sup>5</sup> The relatively small corpus of research in this area includes: Ted Jelen, “Political Esperanto: rhetorical resources and limitations of the Christian Right in the United States”, *Sociology of Religion* 66 no.3 (2005): 303-21; Stephen Hunt, “The rhetoric of rights in the UK Christian churches regarding non-heterosexual citizenship”, *Politics and Religion Journal*, 4 no.2 (2010): 183-200; Katherine E. Knutson, “Breaking the Chains? constraint and the political rhetoric of religious interest groups”, *Politics and Religion*, 4 (2011): 312–337; Jeremy N. Thomas and Daniel V. A. Olson, “Evangelical elites’ changing responses to homosexuality 1960–2009”, *Sociology of Religion*, 73 no.3 (2012): 239-272; Stephen Hunt, “Christian lobbyist groups and the negotiation of sexual rights in the UK”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29 no.1 (2014): 121-136; Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM Press, 2013). Jeremy N. Thomas, “Outsourcing moral authority: the internal secularization of evangelicals’ anti-pornography narratives”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52 no.3 (2014): 457–475.

<sup>6</sup> See Amy Adamczyk and Cassady Pitt, “Shaping attitudes about homosexuality: the role of religion and cultural context”, *Social Science Research*, 38 (2009): 338-351; David R. Hodge, “Epistemological frameworks, homosexuality and religion: how people of faith understand the intersection between homosexuality and religion”, *Social Work*, 50 no.3 (2005): 207-218; Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip, “Queering religious texts: an exploration of British non-heterosexual Christians’ and Muslims’ strategy of constructing sexuality- affirming hermeneutics”, *Sociology*, 39 no.1 (2009): 47-65.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard E. Whitley Jr, “Religiosity and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men: a meta analysis”, *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 19 no.1 (2009): 21-38.

concur: ‘people who attribute great importance to God in their lives or who describe themselves as religious are more homonegative’.<sup>8</sup>

These findings have been replicated by research into the British context. Here, attitudes towards homosexual relations have liberalised in recent decades but the influence of religiosity remains strong. According to figures from British Social Attitudes, the proportion of religious adults describing same-sex sexual relations as ‘always wrong’ fell from 55% in 1983 to 41% by 2000, but regular attendees at a place of worship held more conservative positions, at 61% and 49% respectively. In contrast, adults identifying as non-religious were notably more permissive, with 41% claiming that same-sex relations were always wrong in 1983, and with this figure falling to 28% by 2000.<sup>9</sup> More recent data confirms the continuation of these trends. Public opinion surveys have shown that attitudes continue to liberalise across a range of issues, such as equal opportunities for same-sex couples, same-sex adoption, same-sex marriage and the role of homosexuals in public life, but levels of religiosity continue to exert a determining influence.<sup>10</sup>

Figures also show that Britain is becoming an increasingly secular country. The proportion of the adult population describing themselves as ‘Christian’ has fallen from 67% in 1983 to 41% in 2016, while the proportion identifying with ‘no religion’ has grown from 31% to 53% over the same period.<sup>11</sup> These findings are supported by a raft of additional surveys and studies suggesting that secularising trends run through every indicator of religiosity.<sup>12</sup> In this context some research has suggested that religious actors may find it strategically useful to turn away

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<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Jackle and Georg Wenzelburger, “Religion, religiosity, and the attitudes towards homosexuality – a multilevel analysis of 79 countries”, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 62 no.2 (2015): 207-41.

<sup>9</sup> See Alasdair Crockett and David Voas, “A divergence of views: attitude change and the religious crisis over homosexuality”, *Sociological Research Online*, 8 no.4. (2003): 1-11. Table. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Clements, “Attitudes towards gay rights”, British Religion in Numbers, January 2017.

<http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/attitudes-towards-gay-rights/>; on these issues also see Andrew Village and Leslie J. Francis, “Attitude toward homosexuality among Anglicans in England: the effects of theological orientation and personality”, *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 21 no.1 (2008): 68-87.

<sup>11</sup> These figures are available from: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1469605/BSA-religion.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> For instance, see Steve Bruce, “Post-secularity and religion in Britain: an empirical assessment”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 28 no.3 (2013): 369-384.

from the use of theological language and instead attempt to frame their arguments in overtly secular terms. As Stephen Hunt puts it, the use of a secular public discourse can ‘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’.<sup>13</sup>

This research for this study was based on a qualitative analysis of documentary sources from national-level religious organisations engaged in the public debate on the issue of same-sex marriage. This included transcripts of Parliamentary records, public consultation responses, press releases and reports, and was supplemented by a series of semi-structured interviews with elite representatives from a number of the key oppositional groups involved.<sup>14</sup> To help ascertain the novelty or otherwise of any contemporary trends, this research was combined with an historical analysis of House of Lords debates on themes connected to homosexual rights throughout the twentieth century, as well as an analysis of historical media reports that were located using the database LexisNexis. The results of this analysis are consistent with the idea of a strategic shift towards a secular public discourse, showing that religious actors challenging the legalisation of same-sex marriage did so by deploying arguments that largely eschewed theological language in favour of overtly secular frames.

## **The legalisation of same-sex marriage**

In recent years the legalisation of same-sex marriage has become a controversial political issue in many parts of the world. Following in the footsteps of the Netherlands (which legalised same-sex marriage in 2000), same-sex unions have been formally recognised by a

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Hunt, “The rhetoric of rights in the UK Christian churches regarding non-heterosexual citizenship”, *Politics and Religion Journal*, 4 no.2 (2010): 183-200.

<sup>14</sup> These interviews were conducted during 2013 as part of a separate project into the identity of Conservative Christian groups in the UK. The interviews typically lasted for one hour and followed a standard pattern of questioning. All participants held positions at a senior operational and policy-making level within their respective institutions.

variety of countries, including: Belgium and the United States (since 2003), Spain and Canada (2005), South Africa (2006), Norway, Sweden and Mexico (2009), Portugal, Iceland and Argentina (2010), Denmark (2012), New Zealand, France and Brazil (2013), Colombia (2016) and Finland, Germany and Australia (2017).

In Britain the issue of same-sex marriage emerged on the political agenda in 2011, following an announcement by the Scottish government (for which marriage is a devolved issue) that it intended to legalise same-sex unions. In response, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, stated that England and Wales would follow suit. The announcements were followed by two public consultations and the proposals to legalise same-sex unions eventually passed into law in 2013.

The plans to legalise same-sex marriage were publicly opposed by the vast majority of religious organisations (with support from a small minority, most notably the Quakers and the Unitarians). Yet the public discourse that was deployed by religious actors largely eschewed the use of theological claims. For the most part, overt theological justifications remained the preserve of a small number of fringe and relatively minor organisations. Amongst these included the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, whose consultation response asserted that same-sex marriage was ‘forbidden by the law of God’,<sup>15</sup> Christian Watch, which declared that ‘[n]o Bible believing God fearing Christian organisation would allow practising homosexuals in their fellowship’,<sup>16</sup> and Christian Contact, which maintained that homosexuality was ‘an abomination’ and a just cause for being ‘put to death’.<sup>17</sup> Two umbrella groups opposing same-sex marriage were also explicit in their use of theological language. RealMarriage (organised by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales) declared its opposition to be based ‘on the Bible alone’, and described the proposals

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<sup>15</sup> Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Free Presbyterian Submission Same-Sex Marriage, November 30, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Watch, Response to Scottish Government Consultation Questions, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Christian Contact, Response to Scottish Government Consultation Questions, 2012.

as a ‘defiance of God’s moral authority’.<sup>18</sup> Keep Marriage Special aimed ‘to defend the biblical definition of marriage’ and maintained that: ‘The primary argument against the proposed redefinition of marriage is therefore theological: what God has ordained in his written word, neither society nor any government is free to redefine’.<sup>19</sup> Representatives of minority faiths also tended to frame their objections to same-sex marriage in theological terms. A campaign launched by the Muslim Council of Britain (called Muslims Defending Marriage) explicitly focused on Islamic teachings and claimed that marriage was ‘defined by Allah’.<sup>20</sup>

However, such cases were comparatively atypical. Most religious organisations deploying theological justifications did so in a moderate and limited fashion, instead basing the large majority of their opposition on secular arguments. The Church of England (the single largest Christian organisation in Britain) restricted its theological claims to a declaration that the Church’s freedom of manoeuvre on the issue was ‘limited by the word of God in Holy Scripture’,<sup>21</sup> with the Archbishop of Canterbury going so far as to tell the House of Lords that: ‘This is not a faith issue ... It is about the general social good’.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the Church of Scotland founded its opposition on a variety of legal and technical matters, focusing on internal church procedures for resolving disputes.<sup>23</sup> The Scottish Episcopal Church, too, centred on technical matters of process, restricting its theological assertions to a statement

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<sup>18</sup> These quotations are taken from the now-defunct campaign website: <http://www.realmarriage.org.uk/about-us>, available using the Wayback Archive at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120705122300/http://www.realmarriage.org.uk/index.php/submission> (date stamped: 5 July 2012). URL accessed 14 February 2018.

<sup>19</sup> The campaign website is also now defunct but remains accessible via:

<http://wayback.archive.org/web/20121103011151/http://www.keepmarriagespecial.org.uk/main/why-kms> (date stamped, 3 November 2012). URL accessed 14 February 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Muslim Council of Britain, Response to the Government Equalities Office Consultation, 14 June 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Church of England, Evangelical Council, St Matthias Day Statement, 14 May 2012; also see Church of England, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill: Commons Second Reading Briefing’, February 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Hansard. House of Lords Debates, 3 June 2013, col.954.

<sup>23</sup> Church of Scotland, ‘The Registration of Civil Partnerships Same Sex Marriage’, Response to Scottish Consultation. December 2011.



that heterosexual marriage was ‘instituted by God’.<sup>24</sup> The theological language of the Orthodox Church was more ambiguous still, consisting of brief references to ‘divinely-inscribed patterns of human relationship’.<sup>25</sup>

The public discourse deployed by many religious actors made no direct theological references at all. Official representations from the Christian Institute (one of the most active Christian cause groups in Britain) eschewed theological references in favour of a focus on the supposed threats posed to religious freedom.<sup>26</sup> The Christian social reform organisation, Jubilee, explicitly highlighted ‘a non-religious case for retaining the current legal definition of marriage’, noting that ‘plural democracy will only survive if we also offer each other reasons we can expect each other to share’.<sup>27</sup> The Church in Wales followed a similar course, stating that its purpose was ‘not to engage in the debate about the nature of marriage, or the recognition of same-sex relationships, from a theological perspective’.<sup>28</sup> And as the advocacy group, Christian Action Research and Education, explained: ‘The challenge facing Christians who do not believe that same-sex marriage is part of God’s purpose for society, is defending the current legal definition. This depends on having good non-religious arguments’.<sup>29</sup>

## **Secular justifications**

Overall, the public discourse of religious groups opposed to the legalisation of same-sex marriage made limited use of theological justifications. Overtly theological claims were

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<sup>24</sup> Scottish Episcopal Church, ‘Response of the Faith and Order Board of the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church’, 6 December 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Orthodox Church, ‘Response of the Orthodox Christian Churches in Britain and Ireland to the Government Consultation on ‘Same-Sex Marriage’’, 4 June 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Christian Institute, ‘Plans to legalise homosexual marriage in Scotland’, April 2011. Available at: <http://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/downloads/homosexual-marriage-in-scotland.pdf> (URL accessed, 14 February 2018); Christian Institute, Response to Scottish Government Consultation Questions, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Julian Rivers, ‘Redefining marriage: the case for caution’, Jubilee Centre, Cambridge Papers, 21 no.3 (2012). Available at <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/redefining-marriage-the-case-for-caution/> (URL accessed 14 February 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Church in Wales, ‘Response to “Equal Civil Marriage: A Consultation”’, March 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Christian Action Research and Education, ‘Twelve compelling reasons for rejecting same-sex marriage’, May 2012.

restricted to a small number of relatively marginal groups, and organisations using religious arguments did so only to a limited extent. A central characteristic of the oppositional public discourse used by religious actors was its emphasis on secular reasons. These arguments revolved around four key themes: tradition, social utility, democratic values and the threat to religious liberties.

### ***Tradition***

The first secular argument deployed by religious opponents of same-sex marriage emphasised the historical and traditional sources of authority for defining marriage as an explicitly heterosexual category. This was presented as a feature of all human societies and changing the definition of marriage was thus said to be beyond the purview of the state. The Church of England claimed that the ‘intrinsic nature of marriage’ as a heterosexual institution was ‘deeply rooted in our social culture’, and was something ‘which predates church and state’.<sup>30</sup> The Orthodox Church emphasised the historical roots of marriage for the purposes of procreation, noting that such an institution had been observed ‘by virtually all cultures for thousands of years’.<sup>31</sup> The Catholic Church made the same point, highlighting the existence of a ‘commonly understood definition of marriage’ that ‘pre-dates the Church’ as well as ‘all the cultures and societies of today’.<sup>32</sup> The largest oppositional campaign group, Coalition for Marriage, asserted that heterosexual marriage was ‘as old as the hills’ and was ‘not a recent invention of society to be refashioned on a political whim’.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Social utility***

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<sup>30</sup> Church of England, ‘A Response to the Government Equalities Office Consultation - “Equal Civil Marriage”’, 13 June 2012; Church of England, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill: Commons Second Reading Briefing’.

<sup>31</sup> Orthodox Church, ‘Response of the Orthodox Christian Churches in Britain and Ireland to the Government Consultation on “Same-Sex Marriage”’.

<sup>32</sup> Response from the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales to the Government Consultation on “Equal Civil Marriage”, June 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Coalition for Marriage, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill. Second Reading Briefing’, January 2013.

The second argument used against the legalisation of same-sex marriage centred on claims about the social benefits of heterosexual unions. This was said to provide the bedrock for human society, forming the principal basis for social cohesion, order and stability. Opponents claimed that same-sex unions would undermine marriage as an institution, leading to far-reaching and negative social consequences, including greater family breakdowns and rising levels of delinquency. Warning of ‘the uncertain and unforeseen consequences for wider society and the common good when marriage is redefined in gender-neutral terms’, the Church of England asserted that heterosexual marriage ‘benefits society in many ways, by promoting mutuality and fidelity’.<sup>34</sup> Similar points were highlighted by the Catholic Church, which described heterosexual marriage as serving ‘the common good of society’ and claimed that: ‘Fundamentally changing the definition of marriage ... will have far reaching long-term consequences, many of them unintended’.<sup>35</sup> Concerns about the social impact of the proposals were also raised by the Evangelical Alliance, which warned that they would ‘inevitably weaken the place of the family in society’, creating ‘a social, political and cultural disaster’.<sup>36</sup> This point was echoed by the Coalition for Marriage, which noted that heterosexual marriage was ‘a bedrock institution and the most stable environment for raising children’.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Democratic values***

The third form of secular argumentation held that the legalisation of same-sex marriage was unnecessary and unwanted. Many religious actors highlighted the lack of a democratic mandate for introducing the plans, pointing out that none of the main political parties had

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<sup>34</sup> Church of England, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill: Commons Second Reading Briefing’.

<sup>35</sup> Response from the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales to the Government Consultation on “Equal Civil Marriage”; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, ‘Briefing to Members of Parliament on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill’, 29 January 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Evangelical Alliance, ‘Response by Evangelical Alliance to the Consultation on “Gay Marriage”’, 14 June 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Coalition for Marriage, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill. Second Reading Briefing’.

included same-sex marriage in their general election manifestos, and claiming that the proposals had no support from the general public. A British Social Attitudes survey reporting that same-sex marriage was opposed by 63% of respondents was frequently cited, as was a survey conducted by ComRes which put the figure at 70%.<sup>38</sup> Opponents added that same-sex couples could already obtain the legal benefits of marriage through civil partnerships and that permitting them to marry was not essential in order to achieve equality objectives.

These themes were evident in the stance taken by the Evangelical Alliance, which claimed that the proposals had been fuelled by ‘liberal elites in the media and politics’ and were tantamount to a form of ‘coercive social engineering’ designed to serve a ‘tiny, unrepresentative and ideologically motivated minority’.<sup>39</sup> In the same vein, the Church of England complained about the lack of democratic engagement, claiming that the proposals ‘did not feature in party manifestos’ and would ‘deliver no obvious legal gains given the rights already conferred by civil partnerships’.<sup>40</sup> Concerns about the un-democratic nature of the plans were also emphasised by the Christian Institute, which stated that it was ‘particularly wrong for politicians to redefine marriage in the face of opposition from a majority of the public’,<sup>41</sup> and similar points were made by the Coalition for Marriage, which attacked the proposals as being ‘profoundly anti-democratic’.<sup>42</sup> Following the same pattern, the Catholic Church maintained that ‘same sex couples already effectively enjoy equivalent legal rights as heterosexual couples’, and claimed that the proposals had ‘no clear mandate’ given that ‘[t]he British public, as a whole, did not seek this change’.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> British Social Attitudes, 24th report (NatCen, 2008);\_ComRes, ‘Papal Visit’, 12 September 2010, <http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/bbc-catholic-survey-on-papal-visit-12-september-2010/> URL accessed 15 February 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Evangelical Alliance, ‘Response by Evangelical Alliance to the Consultation on “Gay Marriage”’.

<sup>40</sup> Church of England, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill: Commons Second Reading Briefing’.

<sup>41</sup> Christian Institute, Response to Scottish Government Consultation Questions.

<sup>42</sup> Coalition for Marriage, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill. Second Reading Briefing’.

<sup>43</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, ‘Briefing to Members of Parliament on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill’.

### *Religious liberties*

The final secular argument in the case against legalising same-sex marriage focused on the rights and liberties of religious groups and individuals. Opponents claimed that redefining marriage would discriminate against people who wished to belong to (and to proclaim the virtues of marriage as) an exclusively heterosexual institution and would be intrinsically unfair. Government reassurances that legal safeguards would protect defenders of ‘traditional’ marriage from legal action and would protect religious institutions from being forced to conduct same-sex marriages, were said to be of little value given the capacity of activists to pursue their agenda through the legal system.

The view of the Church of England reflected a number of these concerns, including the government’s ability ‘to make the legislation watertight against challenge in the European courts’, and ‘whether the proffered legal protection for churches and faiths from discrimination claims would prove durable’.<sup>44</sup> These points were repeated by the Catholic Church, which warned that the proposals would set ‘a dangerous precedent for government interference with other religious organisations’, and argued that the risk of a legal challenge from the European Court of Human Rights was ‘a significant threat’.<sup>45</sup> Other religious organisations made similar claims. The Orthodox Church warned that the plans threatened ‘the freedom of religious communities to maintain and practise their traditional understanding of marriage’.<sup>46</sup> The Christian Institute complained that changing the law would ‘redefine marriage for the whole of society’, and warned that: ‘If marriage is redefined all the evidence suggests there will surely be an erosion of religious liberty and freedom of conscience’.<sup>47</sup> The Evangelical Alliance claimed that same-sex marriage ‘directly denies the rights of married

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<sup>44</sup> Church of England, ‘A Response to the Government Equalities Office Consultation’; Church of England, ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill: Commons Second Reading Briefing’.

<sup>45</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, ‘Briefing to Members of Parliament on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill’.

<sup>46</sup> Orthodox Church, ‘Response of the Orthodox Christian Churches in Britain and Ireland to the Government Consultation on “Same-Sex Marriage”’.

<sup>47</sup> Christian Institute, Response to Scottish Government Consultation Questions.

couples to be part of a unique institution reserved for one man and one woman based on their complementary biology and procreative potential'.<sup>48</sup>

## **Responding to secularisation**

The character of the public discourse outlined here is consistent with the view that religious groups operating in a largely secularised environment will deploy secular, rather than theological, modes of argumentation in order to try and maximise their appeal. The strategic nature of the public discourse used in the case of same-sex marriage can be further highlighted in three ways: (1) by the historical use of theological language by religious actors; (2) in the contrast between the public and the private (internal) discourse used by oppositional groups; and (3) by interview responses given by elite-level representatives from some of the leading groups involved.

### ***An historical shift***

The use of a secular public discourse by religious actors opposing same-sex marriage appears to have been something of a departure from historical practice on the issue of homosexual rights. While a direct comparison between historical periods is impossible for a number of reasons (one being that many of the cause groups involved in the debate around same-sex marriage were only established towards the end of the twentieth century), and while a full and comprehensive account of the various trends and dynamics of religious public discourse on homosexual rights lies beyond the scope of this study, is it instructive nevertheless to note that religious actors engaging in public debates on these issues have frequently grounded their case in theological justifications.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Evangelical Alliance (2012), 'Response by Evangelical Alliance to the Consultation on "Gay Marriage"'.  
<sup>49</sup> On this point also see Ian Machin, *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998).

The debate around decriminalising homosexual practices first emerged in the late 1950s following the publication of the Wolfenden Report, which recommended decriminalising certain homosexual offences. Supporting the view of the Wolfenden Report, senior members of the Church of England began to argue that crime and sin should now be treated separately, and that homosexual acts could best be treated as a medical, pastoral and (ultimately) a moral issue. Yet, while much of this debate revolved around secular themes, it was not uncommon to find senior Anglicans framing homosexuality in theological terms.<sup>50</sup> During a debate on homosexual offences in 1965, for example, the Archbishop of Canterbury told the House of Lords that homosexual behaviour was ‘utterly abominable’ and that homosexual practices were a sin – although quite how sinful they were remained something of a mystery given the rather complicated business of weighing up the different forms of sexual activity. As he put it: ‘I think it is extraordinarily hard for any of us to assess the relative seriousness of sins. When we start doing that we get into questions to which the Almighty Himself knows the answer and we do not’. Nevertheless, the Archbishop continued, ‘homosexual behaviour has an unnaturalness about it which makes it vile’. This, he explained, was derived from ‘a general emotion linked in the mind between the crime of sodomy and the behaviour of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in the story in the Book of Genesis, who incurred the Divine anger for the most horrible sins’.<sup>51</sup> In a similar, if less colourful fashion, the Bishop of St Albans concurred that it was the Church’s view that: ‘all homosexual acts are intrinsically sinful’,<sup>52</sup> the Bishop of London reasserted that the position of the Church was that, in supporting decriminalisation, ‘we do not condone homosexual practices; nor do we regard them as in any way less sinful’,<sup>53</sup> and the Bishop of Leicester maintained that: ‘It would be a

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<sup>50</sup> On these issues, and for an opposing view, see Matthew Grimley, “Law, morality and secularisation: the Church of England and the Wolfenden report, 1954-1967”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. 60 no.4 (2009): 725-741.

<sup>51</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, 21 June 1965, Cols.301-304.

<sup>52</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, 28 June 1965, Col.684.

<sup>53</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, 13 July 1967, Cols.1290-1291.

bad day for Britain if we came to the point where law ... no longer related in any vital way to the law of Nature or, as I should wish to say, to the Law of God'.<sup>54</sup> Lord Soper, a Methodist minister, maintained that it was the duty of the Church to lead public opinion 'in the light of what we believe to be the Christian principle', and declared that homosexual acts remained firmly within the 'category of sin'.<sup>55</sup>

Following the decriminalisation of homosexual practices in 1967 the theological debate over homosexual rights shifted in new directions, centring now on questions of lowering the age of consent, on homosexual relations within the clergy and on the distinction between homosexual inclinations and practices. Here, too, religious public discourse was based on theological justifications. In 1987, for example, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, warned that Britain was in a state of moral decay due, in part, to 'a decline in a sense of God', and reiterated the Church's view that homosexual practice 'is sinful when it's against a Christian moral teaching based on the Bible'.<sup>56</sup> Runcie's successor as Archbishop, George Carey, followed the same line, maintaining that: 'The problem is that the Bible is very clearly against practicing homosexuality'.<sup>57</sup> Underscoring the point, the Archbishop of York, John Habgood, maintained that the distinction between homosexual inclination and practices was 'rooted in Christian tradition', and claimed that: 'there is something fundamental about our human nature which is safeguarded within the Christian tradition'.<sup>58</sup>

Theological arguments were also evident in the approach taken by the Catholic Church. In October 1986 the Vatican issued a statement claiming that homosexuality was contrary to 'the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the creator's sexual design',

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<sup>54</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, 13 July 1967, Cols.1307-1308.

<sup>55</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, 21 June 1965.

<sup>56</sup> Bernard Levin, "Interview with the Archbishop of Canterbury", *Times*, 30 March 1987.

<sup>57</sup> Ruth Gledhill, "Carey insists Christianity opposes active gays", *Times*, 2 October 1991.

<sup>58</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, 20 June 1994, cls.17-18.



and was ‘contrary to the creative wisdom of God’. Homosexual inclinations were said to be ‘objectively alien to order’, and homosexual acts were described as ‘an intrinsic moral evil’.<sup>59</sup> In 1993, ahead of a Parliamentary vote on lowering the age of consent for homosexual activities, Cardinal Basil Hume, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, reasserted the Church’s position that ‘homosexual genital acts are objectively wrong’,<sup>60</sup> and declared that: ‘God expects homosexual people ... to keep his law and to work towards achieving a difficult ideal’. The aim of the Church, he said, was to bring homosexuals to ‘a fuller understanding and realisation of the teaching she holds to be God-given’.<sup>61</sup> Sexual expression, he maintained, was part of ‘God’s plan of creation’, and thus the church ‘does not approve of homosexual genital acts’.<sup>62</sup>

### *Public and private discourse*

While the public discourse used by religious actors in the case of same-sex marriage was a break from historical practice, the downplaying of theological justifications also contrasted with the use of messages that were primarily directed for consumption by members of religious groups themselves. The character of this private (or internal) discourse – involving web-based resources, statements in newsletters and promotional appeals – was based far more on the use of religious justifications.

The Evangelical Alliance placed a much greater emphasis on matters of theology when communicating directly with their own membership.<sup>63</sup> In one ‘Marriage Briefing’ report, for instance, the Alliance described heterosexual marriage as being ‘part of God’s plan for the world’, claimed that marriage between a man and a woman was ‘emphasised throughout the

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Nichols, “Vatican condemns homosexual behaviour”, *Times*, 31 October 1986.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Brown, “Catholic Church seeks change in policy on gays”, *Independent*, 8 April 1993.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Brown, “Catholic church gives gays ‘hope’; Hume is ‘open’ to lower homosexual age of consent”, *Independent*, 21 July 1993.

<sup>62</sup> Ruth Gledhill, “Cardinal condemns gay acts”, *Times*, 21 July 1993.

<sup>63</sup> Evangelical Alliance, “Response by Evangelical Alliance to the Consultation on ‘Gay Marriage’”.

Bible’, and noted that the differences between the sexes were ‘part of God’s design for humanity’.<sup>64</sup> A similar public/private dichotomy was notable in the approach taken by Christian Concern. Despite studiously avoiding the use of theological justifications in their public discourse on same-sex marriage, material designed specifically for consumption by their own members drew on strong theological themes. These included overt references to the centrality of Jesus, to the sinful nature of homosexuality and to heterosexual marriage as being a ‘gift from God’.<sup>65</sup>

The discourse of the Catholic Church followed the same pattern. The arguments used in its public pronouncements on the subject were significantly devoid of theological reasoning, the rationale for which, as set out in a briefing paper by Catholic Voices (an organisation designed to represent Catholicism in the public sphere) was that it was necessary to eschew ‘theological or religious presuppositions in order to argue from natural-law or reason-based propositions’. Catholic Voices claimed that, since civil marriages were ‘outside the authority of the Churches, exclusively religious objections to the proposed change are therefore at best irrelevant or inappropriate’.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, the principal arguments directed towards members of the Catholic Church themselves were far more theologically inclined. A letter from the Archbishops of Westminster and Southwark, distributed for a public reading at all Catholic congregations during Easter 2012, set out a highly religious view of marriage, proclaiming this to be ‘sharing in the mission of Christ’ as well as in ‘the mystery of God’s own life ... between Father, Son and Holy Spirit’.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Evangelical Alliance, ‘Marriage briefing’, March 2012.

<sup>65</sup> For example, see Christian Concern, ‘Government Equalities Office Consultation on Equal Civil Marriage. Response by: Christian Concern’, 2012; Andrea Minichiello-Williams, ‘The attempt to impose same-sex marriage’, Christian Concern, 11 May 2012.

<sup>66</sup> Catholic Voices, ‘In Defence of Conjugality: The Common-Good Case Against Same-Sex Marriage’, Briefing Paper, March 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Vincent Nichols and Peter Smith, ‘A Letter on Marriage from the President and Vice-President of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales’, 10 March 2012.

A similar dynamic was notable in the discourse of Coalition for Marriage, as well as its Scottish counterpart, Scotland for Marriage. In their public statements, campaign literature, briefing documentation and petitions these campaigns made scarcely any mention of theological justifications and centred solely on secular themes and arguments, presenting themselves as a broad-based and non-sectarian movement containing people of all faiths and none. This public discourse contrasted with the strongly religious underpinnings of both groups, which had extensive links to conservative religious bodies. Amongst the founder members of Coalition for Marriage included Christian Concern and the Evangelical Alliance, and both organisations had close connections to a variety of religious groups, such as Christian Action Research and Education, Anglican Mainstream and the Christian Institute.<sup>68</sup>

### *Interview materials*

The strategic nature of using a public discourse based on secular language was well-recognised by representatives of oppositional groups themselves. Explaining why religious groups had chosen to use secular, rather than theological, arguments in public, the leader of one high-profile national campaign group noted that this was ‘not because they don’t have these convictions ... it’s because we live in a post-Christian society, so if I use Christian arguments most people are not going to be persuaded by them’.<sup>69</sup> Thus:

the clear teaching of scripture is that anything outside lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage is off limits ... but if I’m arguing it in the public sphere ... I’d talk about the importance of marriage as the bedrock of society, the difference between marriage and civil partnerships, the way if there was a change in the law there’d be pressure on churches, marriage registrars, teachers, people working for councils, to behave in certain ways ... you’ve got to use the language that people connect with ... if I’m talking to a Christian audience, then I’ll couch it in different ways.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See Adrian Tippetts, ‘Comment: the Coalition For Marriage – a creeping rhizome of religious extremism’, *Pink News*, 5 March, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Interview #1, 16 April 2013.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Making the same point, another interviewee stated that, while it was impossible to ‘separate the theology out from public discourse’, the use of overtly theological arguments would be politically disadvantageous. As they put it:

There’s a time and a place for it ... 99% of your Christian discourse is going to be implicit rather than explicit in that context, so you’ve got to be sensible about this, I think, because it plays into the hands of the secularists who just want to paint us as some sort of gung-ho.<sup>71</sup>

Other representatives also claimed that the use of a secular public discourse complemented, rather than contradicted, theological claims. According to one respondent, opposition to same-sex marriage was: ‘not that we’re dinosaurs or, you know, stick-in-the-muds ... it’s everything to do with the way the world is made ... all the evidence is that children in a secure mother-father family do best’.<sup>72</sup> Opposing the legalisation of same-sex marriage with secular reasoning, then, was:

Because what we’re trying to do, what Christians in this are trying to do, is persuade ... the majority, the people who are not swayed by religious arguments as such, that this particular view is right ... the appeal is made on arguments that are common ground arguments, common good arguments, and they should be. If God is the creator, then what is good for the creation will be in harmony with what God says.<sup>73</sup>

Another interviewee made the same point equally strongly. As they maintained: ‘the kind of apologetics that I would offer around the position we take is not couched in a religious argument ... in my view there is enough in science that would support the view that we take’. In this context, the use of an overtly secular frame was driven by the fact that ‘most religious groups realise that they have a particular take on reality which is not shared across the

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<sup>71</sup> Interview #2, 23 April 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Interview #4, 22 May 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

board'.<sup>74</sup> Following this line, one interviewee argued that a successful defence of heterosexual marriage could be made on secular grounds because 'science shows and studies show that children do best when raised by a mother and a father'. Thus: 'a lot of secular interfacing arguments were made because they can be made ... I believe them from a faith perspective, from believing in the bible, but science and sociology and life backs it up, it always does'.<sup>75</sup>

One interviewee with a background in helping to organise the lobbying efforts of a prominent Christian group with close links to Westminster confirmed that there had been a shift in the way in which public discourse was used. Noting that the particular group in question had in recent years realised that 'it was no good quoting scripture, it wasn't going to do any good', they explained that there had been a growing awareness that 'they would have to mount relevant arguments and, you know, take part in the discourse that was going on, so they'd have to provide weights of evidence to support their argument that held water'.<sup>76</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The concept of secularisation remains central to social scientific debates about religion, but the impact of secularisation processes on religious actors – in particular, their use of public discourse – has been notably under-researched. By exploring this theme through an analysis of religious opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Britain, this article has shown that religious actors utilised a form of public discourse characterised by a downplaying of theological justifications in favour of overtly secular modes of reasoning.

This framing of the oppositional case is consistent with the idea of a strategic shift in response to on-going pressures posed by the changing landscape of religion and belief. In this

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<sup>74</sup> Interview #6, 6 June 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Interview #3, 25 April 2013.

<sup>76</sup> Interview #5, 23 April 2013.

context, deploying overtly secular justifications denotes a recognition by religious actors of the fact that, in an increasingly pluralised and non-religious society, theological arguments will not be sufficiently persuasive for the majority of the general population. This view is further supported by the fact that theological arguments were a feature of religious public discourse throughout the twentieth century, by the clear dichotomy between the public (secular) and the private (theological) discourses used by religious groups, and by interview statements made by representatives from some of the leading national-level religious groups engaged in the debate around same-sex marriage confirming that their oppositional discourse had been designed to fit the changing circumstances in which they were now having to operate. Future research in this area, focusing on the public discourse used by religious actors on other issues, such as abortion and assisted dying, and studies deploying a more fine-grained analysis of the changing historical patterns involved, would help to chart and unpack these dynamics in greater depth and detail.