

Introduction

My wife and I have just celebrated our 25th Wedding Anniversary this summer. So I don't need convincing that marriage is a good thing and I fully understand why it is a concept which generates such passion and such emotion.

For the same reason, though, I find it difficult to understand why anyone would want to deny the chance to experience it to anyone else. Yet, over the past few months I have had a number of e mails and letters (many of them standard campaign e mails) from those who do not think marriage is appropriate for same sex couples.

To be fair, I have also had e mails and letters from those who do and most of these do not seem to derive from the gay community. So this has not been a one-sided lobbying campaign whatever the press may have us believe. It is also clear that younger people more frequently take a different view than that expressed in the standard e mails. Many of the groups of young people I have talked to struggle to understand what the objections to gay civil marriage are all about.

So, I am left perplexed as to why a change in civil marriage such as this which, important though it is, will directly affect only a few, will be noticed in their daily lives by even fewer and will have minimal if any direct impact on the general population, is causing so much disquiet, particularly when there are such wider benefits.

In 21st century Britain and in what is still, at its heart, a tolerant society, we should not be willing to accept a legal system which effectively casts one group of people in the role of second class citizens on the grounds of their sexual orientation. It is true that gay people will benefit from this change through the greater social and emotional value it will bring them. But it should also benefit us all in helping us become a society more at ease with ourselves and more genuinely focused on equality of opportunity.

This is not some Liberal conspiracy nor is it a war waged on the majority by the minority. It is a thoroughly Conservative aspiration. On the steps of Downing Street in 1992 John Major said that he believed "*in a nation at ease with itself, the development of a truly classless society with opportunities for all from wherever they came to do whatever they can with their own lives by their own efforts and with encouragement to achieve everything that they can. That is the sort of society that my colleagues and I will be working hard to build in the next few years.*"

Gay civil marriage is a strong component of that vision.

Those who have written to me against gay civil marriage have put forward a variety of reasons. Some have done so out of deep and genuine religious belief. Others have done so out of concern for the alleged social implications. Some have been

shockingly alarmist, for example, claiming that a young girl would no longer be able to call herself a 'bridesmaid' in the future. Disappointingly, some have also been based on a type of homophobia that I hoped had become a thing of the past in this country in the 21st century.

I have found these arguments against same sex marriage deeply unconvincing and I want to set out why. Before doing so, let me declare one further interest - as an active Christian member of the Anglican Church.

Civil and religious marriage

Let us be clear that what is being proposed is gay *civil* marriage. Government Ministers have made it clear that this will not affect religious marriage and that individual churches will not be obliged to marry gay couples. I am aware of a legal opinion that seems to question this. However, its conclusions have merely served to highlight the areas which will need examination in order to deliver the promises to which Ministers are committed.

Although civil and religious marriages have some similar end results, I regard them as separate acts. In practice, civil and religious marriages are already regarded as two different things in much of mainland Europe and they convey different rights. Indeed, more and more couples here are opting for a civil wedding followed by a church ceremony. For historical reasons, the automatic fusion of the two ceremonies in the UK occurs only where the marriage is conducted by an Anglican priest.

There is, therefore, most certainly a distinct difference between civil and religious marriage and it is perfectly possible to allow gay civil marriage without any impact on religious marriage.

Definitions

Some have laid great store on the fact that the proposed change will 'redefine' marriage. Where is this definition?

There are two possibilities. The first is that this is a reference to a religious definition of marriage and I will deal with that later. The second is that it refers to a civil definition either as set out in a dictionary or more loosely as a general cultural norm.

Assuming it is the second of these, it is difficult to see what force this line of argument has. Dictionaries are not divine works and nor do they present timeless interpretations in some quasi-legal or culturally deterministic way. Their definitions *reflect* custom and usage; they do not drive them. That is why they change from edition to edition and have indeed changed on this issue.

It is worth repeating that point: dictionary definitions do already include reference to gay marriage. Dictionary definitions do not of course convey moral approval or disapproval. They simply provide dictionary users with accurate information about all of the current uses of a word or phrase.

As to the idea that there is a more general and widely accepted cultural definition of marriage, that too does not stack up. Effectively, this comes down not to the idea of a definition but to tradition. Since gay marriage has not been possible in the past it is hardly surprising that tradition does not yet reflect it.

However, we should not be defined by the social attitudes of the past or assume that society should conform to our expectations rather than us adapting to evolving social norms. This whole issue is a reminder that values can change: until forty years ago homosexuality was a criminal offence; ten years ago the concept even of civil partnerships would not have been considered.

The social view

The former Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, has echoed the comments of the Prime Minister. He has pointed out that the idea of gay marriage can be seen to strengthen the wider institution of marriage as a whole by the emphasis it puts on faithfulness and stability and a public declaration of commitment. It does that at a time when marriage is at a low ebb. That is a message which needs to be heard across many areas of social policy. However, some have tried to suggest that gay civil marriage will have an adverse effect on society.

That has certainly not been the case in Spain which legalised gay civil marriage in 2005. It was the third European country to do so. As in many countries in mainland Europe, an official wedding certificate is only provided in Spain at a civil service. A religious service of itself does not register the marriage.

Opinion polls in Spain either side of the law showed majorities of between 60% and 65% in favour of the change. 6 years later, opinion seems to have hardened even further with a poll in 2011 showing 77% in favour amongst the under 30s. In Spain, as in the UK, this issue seems to have had more of a generational slant than a religious one.

When the conservative Partido Popular was elected in November 2011 there were fears that the law would be repealed or that the government would argue strongly against it in the Constitutional Court. However, Spain's new Justice Minister, Alberto Ruiz Gallardón, has commented that he would prefer to leave Spain's gay civil marriage laws unchanged.

One factor which may be influencing opinion is the fact that many Spaniards have had little experience of gay marriage. Few will ever have seen one take place since they account for less than 2% of all marriages in the country. As to the effect of gay marriage on traditional marriage; there does not appear to have been any negative effect.

The religious view

For those like me who pride ourselves on being liberal Anglicans, the 'Christian' e-mails I have recently been sent in relation to gay civil marriage have said more about the lack of fellowship and tolerance amongst those of different Christian traditions than about the issue of gay civil marriage itself. With only thinly disguised venom, I have been branded a 'liberal Anglican' with the same force I imagine I would have been branded a heretic under the Inquisition. In an historical comparison bristling with classic school-boy howlers I have been held responsible for recreating the last days of the Roman Empire. One constituent told me that being an Anglican was anyway insufficient justification for me calling myself a Christian! Others have assured me that they and only they can know God's will and that I should just do as I am told. One dismissed the whole of Christian teaching other than that from the Catholic Church, in the words of Timothy, as turning "*aside to myths*" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Others have tried to convince me that this or that Church has been constant throughout history and that its views on any subject anyway come directly from Christ himself. For the avoidance of doubt, we are talking about a mainstream Christian Church here. It has hardly been an edifying spectacle and it is one which has shown how thin the cause of ecumenism really is.

As I have tried to point out, the Government's proposals relate to gay civil marriage; not to religious marriage. In these circumstances, I do not accept that the Church 'owns' marriage as a whole or has a particular block on change; however important a role marriage may play within the sacramental life of any individual Church or denomination.

Indeed, I am not sure to which 'Church' those who have written to me are referring in seeking to oppose gay civil marriage on religious grounds. It is clear that Christianity has no universal view of the issue. The same differences on this issue are mirrored apparently in the Jewish faith between Orthodox and Reformed Jews. I would point you to a particularly well-balanced letter in The Times on 19 March from a Rabbi in favour of gay marriages.

As mentioned above, this issue has revealed just how wide the gulf is between individual Christian denominations. The theological issues involved are complex and I am not going to go into them in any detail here. However, as a practising Anglican I do not share the view that the concept of gay marriage is fundamentally unChristian

or anti-Biblical and nor do I believe the Bible can be used in such a fundamentalist way.

Let me, therefore, be clear about my views. The Bible sets out an account of the overall scope within which humanity operates. However, the Bible does not justify us in concluding that it is the sole source of a comprehensive law that will regulate how we behave for all time.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury has said: *“we don't turn to the Pentateuch [which includes Leviticus] for a full definition of the law under which Christians must live, because the Pentateuch itself is part of the historical process of revelation, foreshadowing something greater.”* God's purpose is discerned as much through reasoning and practice as through scripture and tradition. The 'Church' needs to give value to this and to reasoned argument to help determine how our lives should be lived out in detail in this or that setting.

Many Christian churches in Europe do not view monogamous same sex relationships as sinful or immoral. These include all German Lutheran, reformed and united churches in Germany, all Swiss reformed churches, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the United Protestant Church in Belgium, the Danish National Church, the Church of Sweden, the Church of Iceland and the Church of Norway. There are a number of Christian Churches around the world which are also happy with the concept of gay marriage.

I was delighted to see the thoughtful comments of those like the Anglican Bishop of Salisbury who have tried to inject reason and perspective into the debate. The Bishop quite rightly points out that the traditional, religious concept of marriage (the religious 'definition' as it were) has itself been changing over the last half century and more.

The idea that the purpose of marriage is for the pro-creation of mankind, for example, needs to be seen in the context of the freedom given to married couples not to have children as a result of contraception. The arguments over whether divorced individuals can re-marry are also part of the same debate. Indeed the marriage of divorcees in church eventually came about because Anglican clergy used their rights as registrars in their parishes to celebrate marriages of divorcees even though canon law had not agreed this.

This evolution even in what is considered to be traditional religious marriage can be seen further in the Anglican Church which between 1908 and 1958 removed its objection to contraception and established that the number and frequency of children (including not having any at all) was something for the consciences of the potential parents, and that they could manage their family and fertility themselves.

Even within the Catholic Church, evolution of the concept of marriage is taking place in practice. A 2008 Tablet study suggests that most practising Catholics are ignoring the Church's teachings on contraception and sex. 82% of people are familiar with the Church's moral teachings but more than half of 18-45 year olds still cohabited before marriage. The contraceptive pill is used by 54.5% and nearly 69% had used or would consider using condoms.

Other words in a religious context have also changed over the last few years. 25 years ago, 'chorister' would have been defined as a male adult or boy who sings in a choir. Fortunately, that definition is no longer sexually restricted. More recently, 'priest' would have been defined solely in male terms. Fortunately, that too is no longer the case in many Churches and I hope that we will soon be 'redefining' the term 'bishop' in similar fashion.

My views on the Bible and my own faith views are the product of my own religious journey. I accept that others may have taken a different path and reached different conclusions even within the envelope of a Christian philosophy. That is why faith is ultimately so personal. However, many of those who have written to me about this issue have as I set out at the beginning of this paper failed to extend to me the tolerance and freedom of religious belief I have extended to them.

The truth is that the Church does all too often 'lock out' people whether they are gay or not and even when their behaviour reflects a celibate life. The appalling treatment of Jeffrey John is a good example and one which owes more to the short-term political and secular needs of the Church in this world than to any fundamental religious belief. Indeed, the levels of discrimination in the church whether against gays or against women or of those of a different Christian approach I find difficult to see as other than unChristian.

The political dimension

Let me now deal with the issue of party politics. At the time of the last election the Conservative Party publicly committed to examine the issue of gay marriage in its Equalities Manifesto and the Prime Minister has raised it on a number of occasions.

What motivates people to vote for a political party is of course a personal matter. However, I find it difficult to believe that the issue of gay civil marriage is an all-defining issue which will colour how someone will vote above all other issues. This is particularly so given what this Government is achieving to move our country forward and which would potentially be put at risk.

But then, the threats I receive not to vote Conservative again if this change goes ahead are not seeking to punish me for my political views on this topic. They are seeking to punish me for my religious views.

For many who have written to me, the irony seems to have escaped them that the religious freedom they demand for their own views (including the certainty that they alone know God's will) is the very same religious freedom they seem to want to deny me and those of faith who take a more liberal Christian view. I can think of nothing which is so quintessentially fundamentalist in the worst sense of the word..

I also find it difficult to reconcile the threat not to vote for me at the next election on this one issue with the openness of my own party in recognising that this is an issue of conscience.

Getting the economy right

The idea that some have advanced that our concentration should be on one thing and one thing only – the economy – is perverse. While Government and Parliament were focused during the Second World War on defeating Hitler, it did not stop the war-time coalition setting the agenda for the welfare state, for social security, for the NHS, for education and for housing. It is now by some historians regarded as having been the most radical Government till then since Asquith.

Equally, those who say that in the current economic situation Parliament should be exclusively concentrating on the economy, fail to say exactly on what Parliament should be concentrating. Parliament exists in part to make laws and regulations; but the British economy does not need more regulation its needs less but better regulation.

That is why over half of a tranche of 1500 regulations have already been either abolished or reformed and why we are concentrating on making sure that Britain is the best place in which to do business. Let us not forget what has already been achieved. In two years we have eliminated 25% of the deficit and the Government is saving a total of £36 billion in debt interest payments compared to its predecessor.

Our focus is on reforms which are on the side of people who work hard and want to get on in life – to fix our broken society as well as our broken economy. That is why, in the teeth of Labour opposition, we have put a cap on the amount of benefits a household can receive. We are already putting in place the major structural changes that will help take our country forward.

Fundamental change

Allowing gay civil marriage is not a fundamental change at all and will, on the basis of evidence from elsewhere around the world, have no effect on the structure of

society or on religious marriage. Above all, whichever way you approach this issue, there is no evidence of any harm which such a change would create. I have listened carefully to the views that have been put forward and I have read in detail the points that have been made. However, I cannot help but conclude that no compelling case has yet been made against this rather modest change. Rather, its contribution to a tolerant society at ease with itself is something which all Conservatives should support.