

Lord Alli of Norbury
House of Lords
Westminster

29th May 2013

Dear Waheed,

Thank you for asking me to set out why I am sympathetic to the possibility of equal marriage and have a different view from that stated in the Church of England's response to the Equal Civil Marriage consultation. That response from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in June 2012, written in consultation with the Archbishops' Council and House of Bishops, was prepared under the pressure of the government's absurdly short period for consultation on a major legislative social and legal change. The Archbishops affirmed what the Church has always taught (with Judaism and Islam) that marriage is a gift of God in creation, the lifelong union of a man and a woman. A subsequent document has been produced by the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission on 'Men and Women in Marriage'. That this is 'for study' indicates a discussion continues to run within the Church of England. This was acknowledged in a recent briefing from the Church of England to MPs for the Commons Report stage which stated: "the Church of England recognises the evident growth in openness to and understanding of same sex relations in wider society. Within the membership of the Church there are a variety of views about the ethics of such relations, with a new appreciation of the need for, and value of faithful and committed lifelong relationships recognised by civil partnerships."

You, as a gay Muslim, will not be surprised that there are a variety of views within the Church of England where we are experiencing rapid change similar to that in the wider society. This is complex to express, partly because there are those who see this issue as fundamental to the structure of Christian faith. It is also complex because of the worldwide nature of the Anglican Communion in which what might be said carefully in one cultural context (for example, the USA) can be deeply damaging in another (for example, parts of Africa). Change and development are essential in the Church, as they are in life, and part of the genius of a missionary Church is its ability to root the good news of Jesus Christ in varied cultures in every time and place. One of the difficulties now is that globalisation and communication mean it is much more difficult for Christianity to develop in this culturally sensitive way. There has been a very uncomfortable polarisation of views even in our own country.

Whilst marriage is robust and enduring, what is meant by marriage has developed and changed significantly. For example, the widespread availability of contraception from the mid- twentieth century onwards took several decades to gain acceptance for married couples by the Lambeth Conference in 1958. The newer forms of the Church of England's marriage service have since recognised that the couple *may* have children. Over the last fifty years the Church of England has come to accept that marriages intended to be lifelong can break down and that on occasion marriage after divorce can be celebrated in the context of Church. It is also the case that most couples now live together before they marry. This happens without censure from the Church which continues to conduct these marriages joyfully even though the Church's teaching is that sexual relationships are properly confined to marriage.

The desire for the public acknowledgement and support of stable, faithful, adult, loving same sex sexual relationships is not addressed by the six Biblical passages about homosexuality which are concerned with sexual immorality, promiscuity, idolatry, exploitation and abuse. The theological debate is properly located in the Biblical accounts of marriage, which is why so many Christians see marriage as essentially heterosexual. However, Christian morality comes from the mix of Bible, Christian tradition and our reasoned experience. Sometimes Christians have had to rethink the priorities of the Gospel in the light of experience. For example, before Wilberforce, Christians saw slavery as Biblical and part of the God-given ordering of creation. Similarly in South Africa the

Dutch Reformed Church supported Apartheid because it was Biblical and part of the God-given order of creation. No one now supports either slavery or Apartheid. The Biblical texts have not changed; our interpretation has.

The pace of change with regard to same sex relations has been considerable. The Wolfenden report (1957) and Sexual Offences Act (1967) decriminalised homosexual acts in private between men aged over 21 years in England and Wales. This received cautious support from the Church of England at the time. The changes they introduced are now unchallenged and wholly welcomed.

At the co-educational North London Grammar School I attended from 1965-72, there were 2 effeminate gay lads in my year who were no threat to the rest of us but who were regularly beaten up just for being different. At times school for them must have been a brutal experience. What they went through was unkind and unjust but I don't remember a teacher intervening on their behalf. I am thankful things have changed and we now have a greater sense of equality and fairness. In the current debates it is striking that within the Anglican Communion one of the strongest supporters of same sex marriage is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. From his experience of the racism of Apartheid he sees same sex marriage as primarily a matter of justice.

When the proposal for civil partnerships was debated in 2004 the Church of England was largely hostile. I am grateful that in the Archbishops' opposition to equal marriage they have expressed their support for civil partnerships and I hope this will help the Church of England towards affirming these relationships liturgically. Like the Archbishops now, I used to think that it was helpful to distinguish between same sex civil partnerships and heterosexual marriage. Many in the churches think the commonly used description of civil partnerships as 'gay marriage' is a category error. However, the relationships I know in civil partnerships seem to be either of the same nature as some marriages or so similar as to be indistinguishable. Indeed, the legal protection and public proclamation which civil partnership has afforded gay relationships appears to have strengthened their likeness to marriage in terms of increasing commitment to working on the relationship itself, to contributing to the wellbeing of both families of origin, and to acting as responsible and open members of society. Open recognition and public support have increased in civil partnerships those very qualities of life for which marriage itself is so highly celebrated. It is not surprising this now needs recognition in law.

The possibility of 'gay marriage' does not detract from heterosexual marriage unless we think that homosexuality is a choice rather than the given identity of a minority of people. Indeed the development of marriage for same sex couples is a very strong endorsement of the institution of marriage. The 'quadruple locks' contained in the Bill provide extraordinarily robust protection for those religious bodies, including the Church of England, unwilling or unable to conduct same sex marriage without accusation of being homophobic.

This subject provokes strong feelings but in most churches a variety of views will be found. I hope this letter helps to say briefly why there is a greater variety of views within the Church of England than can be expressed in the formal statements of the Church or House of Bishops. At its best the Church is committed to the Spirit of God leading us into all Truth in what is a complex period of social change.

Yours sincerely

+Nicholas Sarum

The Rt Revd Nicholas Holtam
Bishop of Salisbury