Ties that bind and divide

Despite the Church's strong condemnation of same-sex marriage, a YouGov survey commissioned for this week's debate on the issue finds that it splits British Catholics down the middle between a desire for equality and abiding belief in difference

Overall, the YouGov survey concludes that 44 per cent of Catholics say same-sex couples should be allowed to get married, and 41 per cent say they should not, *writes Linda Woodhead.* The remaining 15 per cent don't know.

When asked the related question about whether same-sex marriage is right or wrong, the proportions reverse: 44 per cent say it is wrong and 36 per cent that it is right. A larger 20 per cent don't know. In other words, a minority of Catholics who, despite their personal belief that same-sex marriage is wrong, think it should be allowed. One of the Catholic contributors to our debate, Lord Deben (John Gummer), holds this opinion. He argues that the Churches should not attempt to impose their stricter Christian understanding of marriage upon "state marriage".

How do Catholics compare with others? When it comes to allowing same-sex marriage, Catholics are identical to Anglicans, more permissive than Methodists, Baptists and Muslims, and more restrictive than Jews, Hindus and those of "no religion". Overall, our survey finds that 52 per cent of the population are in favour and 34 per cent against – so Catholics are a little less permissive than the general public.

Among Catholics, who is most opposed to allowing same-sex marriage? The factors that count most are: (1) age – young people are three times more likely to be in favour than those aged 60-plus; (2) believing that there is "definitely" a God; (3) gender – 40 per cent of men are against same-sex marriage, compared with 27 per cent of women; (4) taking most authority from God or other religious sources. In other words, older men who are most certain there is a God, and who regard God, religious teachings, leaders and Scriptures as most authoritative, are the strongest opponents of the proposal to allow same-sex marriage.

The most common reason given by those who say same-sex marriage is right is that "people should be treated equally whatever their sexual orientation" (77 per cent). The most common reason given by those who say same-sex marriage is wrong is that "marriage should be between a man and a woman" (79 per cent). This is a debate which pivots around the question of whether men and women are basically equal and similar, or abidingly different.

■ Linda Woodhead is professor of the sociology of religion at Lancaster University. She organises the Westminster Faith Debates with the Rt Hon. Charles Clarke; the debates are funded by Lancaster University, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. Videos and podcasts can be viewed at www.religionandsociety.org.uk

'Shouldn't the Church consider nurturing positive models for consensual and monogamous homosexual relationships?'

The Government believes that extending marriage to same-sex couples will ensure the ancient institution "is relevant for our century", *writes Steve Chalke.*

But I'm worried that the noise of the arguments around gay marriage is clouding the real question for the Church: the nature of inclusion. I am convinced that it is only as the Christian community grapples with this that we will find wise answers, not only regarding gay marriage, but also to related questions around the Church's wider attitude to gay people.

One tragic result of the Church's historical rejection of faithful gay relationships is our failure to provide homosexual people with any model of how to cope with their sexuality, except for those who have the gift of, or capacity for, celibacy. In this way we have left countless people vulnerable and isolated. Promiscuity is always damaging and dehumanising. Casual and self-centred expressions of sexuality – homosexual or heterosexual – never reflect God's faithfulness, grace and self-giving love. Only stable relationships can offer the security in which well-being and love can thrive. When we refuse to make room for gay people to live in loving, permanent relationships, we consign them to lives of loneliness and fear. Shouldn't the Church consider nurturing positive models for consensual and monogamous homosexual relationships?

I have formed my view not out of any disregard for the Bible's authority, but, through prayerful reflection, seeking to take it seriously. Minority interpretations of Scripture often struggle for decades before becoming accepted. Take the example of slavery. William Wilberforce and friends were condemned by the Church as they fought for abolition. On the basis of a straightforward biblical exegesis of the Bible's text, their critics were right. However, Wilberforce and his friends reached their conclusions by building their stance around the deeper resonance of Scripture, the compass for which is Jesus, who was radically inclusive of social outcasts of his day, challenging perceived orthodoxy. Wilberforce recognised that it was thoughtful conformity to Christ – not unthinking conformity to either culture or textual prohibitions – that should be the Church's unchanging reference point. Shouldn't we take the same principle that we now readily apply to slavery, and numerous other issues, and apply it to our understanding of faithful homosexual relationships?

Numerous studies show that suicide rates among gay people, especially young people, are comparatively high. Church leaders sometimes use this data to argue that homosexuality is unhealthy when, tragically, it's anti-gay stigma, propped up by church attitudes, that all too often drives these statistics. When we push homosexual people outside our communities and Churches; when we blame them for what they are; when we deny them our blessing on their commitment to lifelong, faithful relationships, we make them doubt whether they are children of God, made in his image.

Rather than continue to condemn and exclude, can we dare to create an environment for homosexual people where issues of self-esteem and well-being can be talked about; where the virtues of loyalty, respect, interdependence and faithfulness can be nurtured; and where exclusive, permanent same-sex relationships can be supported?

Over the coming months, the often heated debate around gay marriage will continue. I am committed to trying to understand the intricacies of the arguments on both sides. But whichever side of the debate we find ourselves on, my hope is that the Church will face what I think is the central issue – what does real, Christ-like inclusion of the gay community look like?

■ Steve Chalke is a Baptist minister and founder of the Oasis global family of charities. An article which deals more fully with the exegesis of the relevant biblical texts, together with a 15-minute video, is available at www.oasisuk.org

During the course of the recent government attempt to legalise gay marriage, it has emerged that this proposal is impossible, *writes John Milbank*. It would be intolerable to define gay marriage as an equivalent to "consummation", or to allow "adultery" as grounds for gay divorce.

Thus despite the squeamishness of discussions of homosexuality, which steer away from its physical aspects, the legislators have been forced tacitly to admit both the different nature of gay sexuality and the different nature of gay relationships. But this admission wrecks both the assumption behind the legislation and the coherence of what the legislation proposes to enact. The assumption behind the legislation is that "fairness" must involve the application of universal rights to each individual in the same way. But the admission reveals that in the current instance such application would be unfair, inappropriate and unrealistic.

The coherence of the legislation depends on making a clear distinction between civil union, which is already allowed for both straight and gay people, and marriage. Yet if the binding and unloosing of gay and straight marriage are stipulated in different ways, then in effect such a distinction has been reinstated. The suspicion arises that the proposed bill desires only an empty change in nomenclature and this is borne out by the fact that the intended circumscription of gay marriage is so diluted as to render it

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indistinguishable from gay civil partnership.

But why then should Christians worry, if this is all merely a matter of words? Perhaps, in order to safeguard the Churches from pressures to conform to the norm, we should now welcome a withdrawal from the Churches of their rights as a civil-marriage broker. This would leave the Churches free to claim that only natural and sacramental marriage is genuinely "marriage", while state marriage is mere civil union. They could trump secularisation by declaring that the era of merely civil marriage had been a failed experiment. This may, indeed, be the direction that the Churches now need to take. However, the graver fear is that secular thought will not so readily let go of the demand for absolutely equal rights based on identical definitions.

In that case we face a more drastic prospect. Not only would marriage have been redefined so as to include gay marriage, it would inevitably be redefined even for heterosexual people in homosexual terms. Thus consummation and adultery would cease to be seen as of any relevance to the binding and unloosing of straight
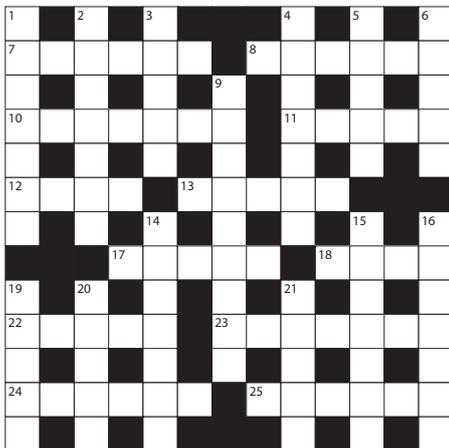
unions. Many might welcome this as a further removal of state intrusion into our private lives. But that would be to fail to consider all the implications. In the first place, it would end public recognition of the importance of marriage as a union of sexual difference. Yet the joining and harmonising of the asymmetrical perspectives of the two sexes is crucial to kinship relations over time and to social peace. Where the reality of sexual difference is denied, it gets reinvented in perverse ways as the over-sexualisation of women and the confinement of men to a marginalised machismo.

In the second place, it would end the public legal recognition of a social reality defined in terms of the natural link between sex and procreation. In consequence, the natural children of heterosexual couples would then legally be their children only if the state decided that they might be legally "adopted" by them.

And this reveals what is really at issue. There was no widespread demand for "gay marriage" in Europe and it has nothing to do with gays or their rights. Instead, it is a crucial move in the state and economy's drive to assume direct control over the reproduction of the population. We are not talking about natural justice, but about the desire of biopolitical tyranny to destroy marriage and the family as the most basic and crucial mediating social institution.

■ **John Milbank is professor of religion, politics and ethics at Nottingham University.**

CROSSWORD No. 356: Alanus

Across

7 Changed robe working as Shakespearean king (6)
8 End letters after most of the county provides popular red wine (6)
10 Reset rite set for end of the "Iron Curtain" (7)
11 Soft redistribution of alms as in example of "The Lord is My Shepherd (5)
12 & 19 Down: Fate of dashed hopes and conclave ballot papers! (2,2,5)
13 Foreigner in hospital I encounter (5)
17 Made choice for Black Friar along with Edward (5)
18 Nature of awakening that is shocking (4)
22 Atoms arranged around castles (5)
23 Old piano with correct moral standing? (7)
24 Victory in the ring upsets lady composer (6)
25 Type of soup mostly for fast time (6)

Down

1 First name of one who upset soup tin and washed his hands (7)
2 Twice I'm involved in new deals for clergy seating in the sanctuary (7)
3 See 4 Down
4 & 3 Down: Part of cathedral dealing with book sections? (7,5)
5 Daughter-in-law of Naomi in love with harp variation (5)
6 End letters and hear why I bring forth unleavened bread (5)
9 Prince of demons for whom bubble bursts with end of American letters (9)
14 Poe linked creatively with last recipient of tongue of fire (7)
15 Glue (with VAT) in a novel way reveals original Bible translation (7)
16 Luke, e.g., was a man with a corrected presentation of a false statement (7)
19 See 12 Across
20 Office at cricket headquarters we hear (5)
21 Attempted to be judged (5)

Solution to the 30 March crossword No. 353
Across: 7 Mayne; 8 Neology; 10 Triduum; 11 Zenas; 12 Palestrina; 16 Provincial; 20 Caeli; 21 Allegri; 23 Sistine; 24 Adela.
Down: 1 Amity; 2 Cyril; 3 Jehu; 4 Anomie; 5 Mozzetta; 6 Council; 9 Yes-man; 13 Ab Initio; 14 Spices; 15 Not Easy; 17 Chapel; 18 Agley; 19 Aidan; 22 Leah.
Winner: Dr Jean van Altena, of Osmotherley, Northallerton.

Solution to the 30 March sudoku puzzle

8	9	2	4	1	7	5	6	3
4	1	5	3	6	9	8	7	2
6	3	7	2	5	8	9	1	4
3	2	9	5	4	6	1	8	7
1	4	6	7	8	2	3	5	9
5	7	8	9	3	1	2	4	6
7	6	3	1	2	5	4	9	8
9	5	4	8	7	3	6	2	1
2	8	1	6	9	4	7	3	5