Religion, Culture and Gender Guides

The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.
Are Roman Catholic opinions on same-sex couples changing in light of new UK law?

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This guide is to serve for Roman Catholic families/individuals directly affected by the new UK law allowing same-sex couples to marry. It is intended to bring into light what the new law actually entails and then focus on the religious implications of this. I will attempt to show various Roman Catholic and wider perspectives on homosexuality and document whether or not these opinions have changed over time. I have included a glossary which briefly defines terms, these are highlighted in red. There is also an annotated bibliography so that the reader can easily see which sources will be relevant to you for further reading.

Case study
On March 29th 2014 gay marriage became legal in England and Wales. The same-sex couples marriage act gives all same-sex couples the right to legally marry; the government believes that this demonstrates respect for all individuals in society regardless of their sexuality. Religious institutions can choose to opt-in but by law they cannot be compelled into performing a same-sex marriage. Civil partnerships can be converted into marriages but there is no obligation for couples to do so. Roman Catholic opinions were generally opposed to the law as it was passed. A religious ceremony marrying same-sex couples will only be possible if the governing religious body has opted-in by giving explicit consent to marry same-sex couples, the individual minister is willing to conduct the marriage and the place of worship where the ceremony takes place has been registered for same-sex marriage. Several couples wed shortly after midnight when the law officially changed.¹

For more information visit:

The guide
The Pope and Bishops

When looking at homosexuality within the Catholic Church, it is crucial that we examine the key magisterial document where laws against homosexuality and same-sex marriage emerged from. This is The Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons published by The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1986. This stated that homosexual inclination is an “objective disorder”. God’s intentions in creating man and woman were for them to reproduce so any act that contradicts this intrinsic human nature is immoral. Homosexual acts directly impact societies understanding of the family. The church believed that homosexuality cannot be innate within a person as homosexuality goes against the will of god and is therefore unnatural. In the face of the new UK law churches must stay true to their teachings regarding family life and disassociate with any groups who do not uphold these values.² This article from authority figures in the church clearly shows an opposition to homosexuality with no room for manoeuvre within the faith


however we must take into account that it was written almost 30 years before the same-sex marriage law in the UK so many social changes have occurred for homosexual peoples since then.

Interestingly, in a half way report of the 2014 synod, Pope Francis indicated that the Catholic Church needs to focus on the positive aspects of homosexuality for Christian communities. There are still moral problems with homosexual acts but emphasis must be shifted away from this and instead the Church needs to look at ways of making homosexuals feel included in Catholicism. It was commented that this was a turning point in that homosexuals would not just be accepted in the church but also have gifts to offer it. However, after the full synod report these claims failed to get the backing of two thirds of the bishops present. The final report only said that anti-gay discrimination was to be avoided. This is a disappointing result for the homosexual community and shows that although talks about homosexual relations in the church are taking place it seems that not much progress is being made with regards to much change actually being implemented.

Catholics opposed to same-sex marriage
Pascal-Emmanuel Gorby argues against the idea of same-sex marriage from an interesting perspective. From the beginning of Christianity what separated Christians from the rest of their culture was a strange sexual ethic. Early Christians refused polygamy, sexual exploitation of slaves, prostitution, exposure of infants and homosexuality. Christians embodied a different way of life; a particular sexual ethic was a foundation to this. Throughout its history Christianity has been consistent in the fundamental precepts of Christian ethics, some of which make same-sex marriage an impossibility. Christianity is not a religion that is unable to empathise with what could be viewed as a strange sexual ethic because this is what part of the foundations for the Christian religion was. However, acceptance of homosexuality would mean that Christianity is going against one of the fundamental ideologies that defined the religion.

Articles from a Catholic perspective in the run up to the same-sex marriage act indicated that there is no room for change in the Catholic religion because of the definition of what a marriage is. Peter D Williams provided an article indicating how Catholic people can provide an argument against same-sex marriage. He recognised that this may seem counter intuitive to the society we live in but reinforces this with the statement “God never asks us to do something that He does not give us the grace, strength, and ability to accomplish.” This highlights that there can always be a justification in the Catholic Church for something that may seem like it goes against the views of others. The basic definition of marriage is a union of a man and a woman with the main aim of providing children. Heterosexual marriage is the

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4Peter D Williams, “How to Argue Against Same-sex marriage”, Catholic Herald online, 12th March 2012, [http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2012/03/21/how-to-argue-against-same-sex-marriage/](http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2012/03/21/how-to-argue-against-same-sex-marriage/) Last accessed: 10.01.2015
result of human nature, men and women have paired themselves together which will result in the next generation being born and raised in a stable family environment. This idea was a formal institution by the government in recognising the benefits of marriage for a child’s upbringing that is now being contradicted by the same-sex marriage law. With this view in mind we can clearly see that some Catholics will never have opportunity for same-sex marriage to be a part of their religion.

**Quest**

Articles published about the synod show both a positive response and a need for action from the homosexual Catholic community. The openness of discussion about lesbians and gays was a remarkable change and it showed that a much needed conversation about sexuality has finally begun in the church. It has come to light that there are a number of bishops who are willing to talk about more openness towards the LGBT Catholic community. Moving towards the synod on family in October 2015 Quest is urging its members and their friends and families to write to bishops and the pope so that they can gain perspective and opinions on issues within the LGBT Catholic community from insiders. Letters to the pope would include requests for him to appoint LGBT persons as official observers to the synod so that bishops can hear personal testimonies of the life of LGBT Catholics. This shows that same-sex couples must be willing to take action in relation to their own circumstances and push for the change that they wish to see in the church. Same-sex marriage is a huge step towards LGBT people being accepted socially but religiously Quest is illustrating that for change within the official Roman Catholic Church to be instigated, as a community they must work to help achieve this.

Andrew K T Yip conducted a study of Quest members in December 1995 through a postal survey of 121 members. The majority of the respondents considered homosexual acts within a relationship compatible with their Catholic Faith. This follows an argument that a relationship should be judged on its quality not sexual form and also that the Church’s teachings were based on inaccurate Bible interpretation. Overall the study found that Catholic homosexuals were able to manage “the disjunction between their personal faith and the religious teachings imposed by religious institutions.” They have a lack of social acceptance within the church but 76.1% attended Mass on a weekly basis. This research demonstrates that homosexuals do not have to choose between their sexuality or faith but must internally combine these in a way that is comfortable for them. Considering that this research was conducted almost 10 years before the new UK law was passed we can assume that in light of homosexuality being widely accepted socially, within the Catholic faith homosexuals are going to feel even more confident within themselves.

**Homosexuals opposed to same-sex marriage**

It is important not to assume that all homosexual peoples are in favour of the new UK law. Much literature has been written by self-identified homosexuals on the matter of same-sex marriage. One issue is that by introducing same-sex marriage as a means of justice we are teaching gay teens that non-conformity is a bad thing, rather than embracing the differences that both straight and gay individuals have we are making it so that all people conform to

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universal laws. Other problems are that there are larger social issues within the government that needed to be addressed before the rights of gays to marry. These points interestingly show that although gay people may not be opposed to the idea of the new law they feel that it was the wrong step for the LGBT community to take at the time.

A UK perspective echoed these views in saying that the conservative government pushed the gay marriage law in order to gain popularity for their political party. Within the gay community marriage was not an urgent issue as they already had a similar institution of civil partnership. “A poll by Catholic Voice of 550 gay men and women suggested only 40 per cent identified the change in marriage as their priority.”

Civil partnership is not available to the heterosexual community so arguably marriage should not have been changed to include same-sex couples. This point of view provided by a loosely catholic gay man is ideal when looking into the larger question identified in this guide. If some parts of the homosexual community themselves do not agree with the same-sex marriage law then how is it possible to expect the Roman Catholic Church to change.

Summary
Attribution theory is interesting to consider here, this determines people’s views as to whether people are responsible or not for their homosexuality. “People who considered homosexuality as a controllable state would report more negative attitudes towards homosexuals than those who viewed homosexuality as uncontrollable” within religion homosexuality is frequently considered a sin and therefore logic dictates that one’s sinful acts are chosen so homosexuality could not be considered a biological phenomenon. This dictates that homosexuals can be held personally responsible for their sexual orientation.

I have illustrated through the different perspectives shown in this guide that one cannot assume the views of a certain community with regards to the same-sex marriage law. There is a wide variety of opinions both within the Roman Catholic faith and also the gay community. Arguably Roman Catholics must first accept the idea of homosexuality in general before they can begin to consider the idea of same-sex marriage. This progression will clearly take a long time but the slight change in views that has been instilled with the new Pope indicate that changes are taking place within Catholicism and these will only continue to grow. By highlighting groups such as Quest I have shown a prime example of how homosexual Catholic people can find a place where their religious beliefs and sexual orientation are both accepted. I would urge people who think that they are being discriminated against by the Catholic Church to look at the Quest website and get involved with a local meeting near you.

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Glossary

**Act** in a legal sense it is the product of a bill that has been passed through the various legislative steps required for it and become law.

**Civil Partnership** A legally recognized union of a same-sex couple with rights similar, but not identical, to those of marriage.

**Congregation for the Doctrine of The Faith** the congregation’s purpose is to defend points of Christian tradition which seem in danger because of new and unacceptable doctrines and also promote and preserve the catholic faith within the church. It employs an advisory board made up of cardinals, bishops, priests, lay theologians and cannon lawyer.

**Homosexuality** sexual attraction to or sexual relations with a person of the same sex

**Homosexual** a person who is sexually attracted to members of his or her own sex

**LGBT** stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

**Magisterial document** document outlining laws lay down by the Pope and the bishops in communion with him

**Minister** a person who is authorised to perform religious functions in a Christian Church.

**Moral** the principles of right and wrong behaviour

**Objective disorder** something that points towards an intrinsic moral evil but is not evil or sinful in itself

**Pope Francis** The reigning Pope of the Catholic Church meaning he is Bishop of Rome, ruler of the Vatican City and head of the Catholic Church. His office began on 13th March 2013. The pope has ultimate authority in the Catholic faith.

**Quest** A UK group for lesbian, gay and bisexual Catholics. Its purpose is to proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ so as to sustain and increase Christian belief among homosexual men and women.

**Synod** A council of the Catholic Church comprising of the clergy convened to discuss issues of the doctrine, administration or application. The synod examines social changes of the time in relation to church teachings. Normally synods are conducted every couple of years. In this case it was an extraordinary synod meaning that it was to discuss matters that need a quick solution. This is the third extraordinary synod that has been called since their reinstitution in 1965.

**Vatican City** an independent walled state ruled by the Pope within the city of Rome.
Annotated bibliography


- Davies Article was useful to provide a half way insight into the synod, documents a change in church attitudes towards homosexual people and the family.

- Study outlines basic principles of attribution theory. Also gives detailed study results and summarises generally what type of people believe that homosexuality is controllable or not.

- Covers a Catholic argument against same-sex marriage form a different perspective. Groby discusses the history of the Christian faith and why this means that they cannot condone homosexuality. Different to many other articles regarding prohibition of same-sex marriage so good to read.

- Article covers an LGBT reaction to the recent synod which shows insider perspective. Gives examples of what LGBT people can do in order to implement change in their community and also the Catholic Faith in general. Contains real life examples of why people should take action.

Pierce, Andrew. “I’m a gay man who oppose gay marriage. Does that make ME a bigot, Mr Cameron”, *Daily Mail online*, 12th June 2012, [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2158416/I-m-gay-man-opposes-gay-marriage-Does-make-ME-bigot--Mr-Cameron.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2158416/I-m-gay-man-opposes-gay-marriage-Does-make-ME-bigot--Mr-Cameron.html)
- UK perspective of alternative view of gay people who oppose the same-sex marriage law. Highlights how the government will benefit from the law and opinions from the gay community.

- Chapter 10 gives a general overview of the origins of church teachings prohibiting homosexuality. The chapter goes on to cover legal developments in a chronological order and the churches response to these. This chapter of the book is extremely
relevant to this study but unfortunately as it was published in 2010 does not include the same-sex marriage law.

Williams, Peter D. “How to Argue Against Same-sex marriage”, Catholic Herald online, 12th March 2012, http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2012/03/21/how-to-argue-against-same-sex-marriage/

- Catholic publication that highlights the definition of marriage for many Catholics cannot be changed. Interesting that it is an advice piece for Catholics to persuade people against same-sex marriage. Shows a very definitive viewpoint.

Yip, Andrew K T. “Dare to Differ: Gay and Lesbian Catholics' Assessment of Official Catholic Positions on Sexuality” from Sociology of Religion, 1997, 58 (2) pp165-180

- Studied Quest members to gain their perspective in issues of homosexuality in Catholicism. Article includes detailed results of the study and explanations of the general trends shown. Although the study is dated it is interesting as it shows official data from a homosexual Catholic perspective.

“Same-sex marriage now legal as first couples wed”, BBC online, 29th March 2014
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26793127

- BBC article provided information on the day the same-sex marriage bill was passed. Highlights immediate responses from different groups regarding the new law. Useful to gain perspective of general feelings on the law at the time.

“Catholic synod: Gay rights groups ‘disappointed’”, BBC online, 19th October 2014,
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-29678751

- BBC article after synod was complete. Reflects differentiating views from Pope Francis and Bishops at the synod. Also included comment from gay rights groups and Vatican experts. Extract of a draft and final version of the synod illustrate the change from first to second half of the synod.