

**Message from the  
National Secular Society (UK) and  
International Humanist & Ethical Union**

to the meeting of the European Intergroup  
on Gay and Lesbian rights on the subject

**“Is there any scope for a peaceful co-existence  
between religion and homosexuality?”**

European Parliament in Strasbourg – 14 November 2007

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The good news is the rapid progress in acceptance of homosexuals in many countries, and that this increased acceptance includes many people who would regard themselves as religious.

It is significant that this support is much greater in countries where the church attendance is low and falling, such as in Western Europe, and least where the church is supported more by the population, as for example in Poland and Russia. Support is next to non-existent in Islamic countries.

## **Countries**

Similarly, it is incontrovertible that the countries that are most likely to respect Human Rights for homosexuals are secularised countries while those least likely to respect Human Rights for homosexuals are the ones where religion has most influence. Where Islam is predominant, and the religion and state are practically inseparable, the situation for homosexuals could hardly be worse. Homosexual acts are capital offences in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Nigeria (where the death penalty applies only in the 12 Northern provinces with Sharia law<sup>1</sup>). At the opposite pole are the more secular countries where in varying degrees homosexuals have been included in equality and antidiscrimination legislation and can be parties to civil partnerships or marriage.

## **Institutions**

But even in those Western countries where gay equality has taken hold — including those claiming strong adherence to Human Rights — Christian institutions are worryingly persistent and often effective in their attempts to hold back and even reverse gay rights.

No large Christian denomination is prepared to accept gays on equal terms, let alone support civil unions, and certainly not gay marriage.

The Roman Catholic hierarchy is even more institutionally homophobic under the current Pope — who has instituted a “witch hunt” against all gays working in the RC church, not just practising ones. When speaking to the Council of Europe ostensibly about Human Rights (or rather his distorted version of them), the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church displayed his obsession with homosexuality — comparing gays to kleptomaniacs<sup>2</sup>. Such language creates a climate which hardly discourages the thugs assaulting those attending Moscow Gay Pride in 2006 and 2007.

Many clerics claim, preposterously, that because they oppose all sex outside so-called holy matrimony it is not discrimination to deny gays any sex life, far less civil partnerships. And it is senior clerics like these who are the very ones that come to international conventions and assure everyone that Human Rights were originally a religious initiative and that they support them completely.

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1 [http://www.ilga.org/statehomophobia/State\\_sponsored\\_homophobia\\_ILGA\\_07.pdf](http://www.ilga.org/statehomophobia/State_sponsored_homophobia_ILGA_07.pdf)

2 Strasbourg, 3 October 2007

We contend that religious institutions are more or less beyond persuasion when it comes to the recognition of equal rights for homosexuals. Despite decades of brave campaigning from inside by gay Christians, the attack on homosexuality by religious organisations is growing louder, while the voices that speak out for equality are becoming fewer and weaker. Peaceful coexistence is an option for gays resigned to be second class citizens.

It would be a serious mistake to assume that the homophobia of these institutions affects only them and any gays who are their members. Religious organisations are increasingly taking the offensive: they are lobbying parliaments and international bodies such as the Council of Europe and the UN. They are not content to limit their discrimination to their own members; they are attempting more and more to impose their view of homosexuality on the rest of society through political pressure.

### **UK case study – Religious attitude to gays getting worse**

Anti-gay lobbying, high powered but often unseen, happens even in countries generally tolerant of homosexuals. The United Kingdom is one such case. Despite very low church attendance of 1 in 14 of the population on an average Sunday, religious institutions exert an alarming degree of political influence. Even the allegedly liberal Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the worldwide Anglican church, has just betrayed gays by backing the fundamentalist anti-gay Nigerians and others against the liberal Americans. He did so despite the liberal Americans having already succumbed to pressure and having agreed not to ordain any more gay bishops. Senior appointments to the Church have been for many years, and continue to be, almost exclusively of hardliners.

The few British bishops left who do not take a hard line against homosexuality risk their parishes flouting church “law” and seeking alternative episcopal oversight from foreign reactionary bishops, as some have recently threatened to do. There is relentless pressure to pass control of religious training colleges to evangelicals who take a much harder line on homosexuality. Student unions are being similarly seeing an influx of more evangelical members intent on enforcing a harder line on homosexuality to the concern of some college authorities. Christian campaigning organisations are either being formed or being revived such as in the police or the legal profession and are making their presence very much felt. Alpha, a well-funded interdenominational organisation seeking to recruit new church members with prominent advertising, takes a hard line on homosexual practice.

The (established) Church of England uses its significant influence in Government ruthlessly to further its malign agenda in this area. In 2003, after the closure of a consultation process on employment equality rules, the Church directly intervened to persuade the Government to add an exemption to the rules, which, we are advised, allows an employer recognised as an “organised religion” to directly discriminate against a gay person by applying 'a requirement relating to sexual orientation' on a religious pretext. A complaint by the Society to the European Commission about this is outstanding<sup>3</sup>.

In 2007, Regulations to outlaw discrimination in the provision of services on the grounds of sexual orientation were debated in the UK Parliament. Individual Christians had been supportive but the Regulations faced massive opposition from religious organisations.

Although some individual Christians were supportive, *not one representative* of any church spoke out in favour of the Regulations in any of the Parliamentary debates. Both Anglican and Roman Catholic churches even sought to blackmail the Government by threatening to withdraw services to the poor and close adoption agencies if the Regulations were passed. A Christian campaigning group published a full page advertisement in a national newspaper making erroneous and scaremongering claims about the Regulations. These increasingly strong-arm and sometimes even dishonest tactics by Christian activists are growing with each month. Despite this, the anti-discrimination Regulations were passed with a significant majority. Parliament had said clearly, perhaps for the first time, that it would not be party to this religious bigotry. So, with effort, maybe this new intolerance can be stemmed. However, since this victory, the UK Government has made an extraordinary appointment to a new Human Rights watchdog, the leader of the UK Evangelical Alliance which for many years has denigrated opposed gay equality measures. In an article

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3 It is made in respect of UK Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, especially Clause 7(3), being in conflict with EU anti-discrimination Directive 2000/ 78/EC and in particular its article 4.

seeking to impose Christian values he appears to dismiss Human Rights as a “culture that is being railroaded into an individualistic, rights-orientated mentality” in words attributed to him by the *Daily Telegraph* on 10 April 2006.

## **In the final analysis**

Homosexuals can, and should, peacefully co-exist with religious people who respect the Human Rights of gay people.

Many of those who come to Strasbourg or Brussels for Human Rights discussions ostensibly to represent their religion, are well-meaning liberals. Few, if any, have any real power and their presence simply muddies the water by leaving the false impression that those leading their religious group hold the same liberal views. The stark reality is that very few of those in power hold liberal views. Were such discussions to have any chance of making positive changes, they would have to be with the, (invariably, hard-line) leaders. Almost by definition, they are not open to negotiation.

Gay rights campaigners need to recognise that the vast majority of leaders of religious institutions and their officials are quietly working to subvert the Human Rights of gay people. Their task will be made easier with the adoption of the draft European Constitution/Treaty which in practice lays the path for more religious dialogue/input. Much of this influence is achieved by unpublicised meetings with ministers, other politicians and senior civil servants. Many of them are only too happy to oblige, or perhaps prepared to do so because they are under electoral or pastoral pressure. The Catholic Church is a past and present master at exerting such anti-democratic pressure, as it has done so effectively on abortion.

We pay tribute to those, often modestly-resourced, organisations, such as the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association and the International Lesbian and Gay Association, engaged in this fight. The National Secular Society and International Humanist and Ethical Union have already started down this path at the Council of Europe’s San Marino conference earlier this year<sup>4</sup>. We need to build alliances with other human rights organisations to achieve gay equality in such areas as adoption, civil partnerships and also marriage. Because of marriage’s historical connection with the churches it is likely that this will be the hardest nut to crack, and the reform that will take the longest.

So then, *“Is there any scope for peaceful co-existence between homosexuals and religion?”* Our answer is that, realistically, the only peace that could be negotiated would be on the terms dictated by religious bodies such as the Vatican. And these terms would be unacceptable to any self-respecting gay person or any self-respecting individual unburdened by religious dogma.

Regrettably, we conclude that the hostility from organised religion is not going to cease in the foreseeable future and the battle must be fought to the bitter end. The support for the churches will continue to wither, especially with increased prosperity and this will limit their power to some extent. The question is: will gay people be able to retain, and even build on, the rights that they have achieved over the past three decades in the face of the increasingly aggressive demands of religious reactionaries over civil partnerships and over gay employees in the churches, for example? The answer is “only if they realise they have to fight to achieve it”.

## **Conclusion**

**The human rights and gay communities must recognise the strength of the threat from organised religion and renew their efforts against it. It is essential to expose religious organisations’ paying lip service to their adherence to Human Rights while making concerted attempts to deny Human Rights, especially to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and women.**

**The battle can only be won by employing every possible resource with ingenuity and determination. An essential element in maximising the opposition is to work more closely with other Human Rights groups and those fighting similar battles, such as women’s rights – including women’s right to choose.**

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.secularism.org.uk/terryandkeithmakewavesinsanmarin.html>