

# Cardinal provokes fury with gay marriage attack

By describing gay marriage as an 'aberration', Cardinal Keith O'Brien has brought new ammunition to a raging culture war. But who has the right to define an institution?



PSHE  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES  
HISTORY & POLITICS

## STATE AND CHURCH: WHO DEFINES MARRIAGE?

### PRIME MINISTER

#### DAVID CAMERON

Conservatives believe that society is stronger when we make vows to each other and support each other. So I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative.



### BISHOP

#### RICHARD HOLLOWAY

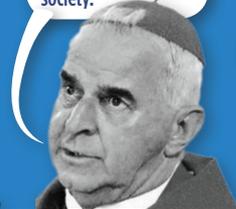
Whatever they say, Christians who oppose gay marriage will, in time, be shown to be on the wrong side of history.



### CARDINAL

#### KEITH O'BRIEN

Redefining marriage will have huge implications...It will redefine society since the institution of marriage is one of the fundamental building blocks of society.



### ARCHBISHOP

#### JOHN SENTAMU

Marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman... I don't think it is the role of the state to define what marriage is.



With the headline 'we cannot afford to indulge this madness', it was always going to be controversial article. But when the 'madness' referred to gay marriage, and Britain's most senior Catholic was the author, this was an argument designed to provoke outrage.

With an impassioned attack in this week's *Sunday Telegraph*, Cardinal Keith O'Brien is just the latest religious figure to criticise same-sex unions. Marriage, he says, is defined as a relationship between a man and a woman; by trying to 'redefine' its terms, politicians are dismantling a historic institution in order to please a 'small group of activists.'

Unsurprisingly, O'Brien's comments have provoked widespread fury. But although most are unimpressed by his homophobic suggestions, many religious figures agree that marriage should be reserved for heterosexual couples – and that the state has no right to change

that. For most of Britain's senior bishops, 'holy matrimony' is the foundation of family and society. They fear the institution will be degraded if homosexuals are allowed to join the club.

The belief is paving the way to what some call a 'culture war' between church figures and politicians. Currently, homosexual couples can enter a civil partnership, which gives them the same rights as a married couple. But David Cameron is 'passionately' in favour of changing the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex couples, and the government will begin a public consultation on the issue this month.

Such an arrangement would concern civil marriage – the legal arrangement, not the religious ceremony held in churches, synagogues or mosques. In fact, marriage long existed separately from religion: apart from a short period between 1753 and 1836, religious ceremonies have been optional, rather than mandatory.

Neither would it be the first time a big change has been made to the institution of marriage. Divorce was illegal in the UK until 1957; a husband's rights over his wife meant 19th Century wives lost all property rights, and the idea of marital rape was not recognised until 1991.

### LAWFULLY WEDDED

Many argue that whenever marriage has changed, it has done so in response to commonly accepted opinions. Religious institutions are deeply involved in the institution of matrimony; to change its meaning against their wishes would be deeply unfair.

Others think it is bishops like O'Brien who are guilty of forcing unfairness on others. Marriage was around long before the Church and it affects people of all religions and none. The loving couples who are affected by marriage must define its terms; not bishops who enforce a religion many people do not believe in.

## Q & A

### Q What do people think will happen if gay marriage is allowed?

A Some use a slippery slope argument: if marriage becomes legal between homosexual couples, they say, in the future three people could get married, if that living arrangement becomes accepted by society. Many say this is unlikely; others argue that

if something is accepted by society, there is no reason why it should not be legal.

### Q What change would gay marriage actually mean?

A Practically, legalising gay marriage would not be a big change. Civil partnerships grant the same legal rights as marriages, and partnership ceremonies can even be held in places of worship, under certain circumstances. But most gay couples object

to having one union for heterosexual couples and another for homosexual – what they call a 'two tier' system.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Marriage should only be between a man and a woman.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

## ► Cardinal provokes fury with gay marriage attack

### WORD WATCH

**Cardinal** – A cardinal is a senior figure of the Catholic Church, usually an ordained bishop. Keith O'Brien is currently the only living cardinal in Scotland; despite having relatively liberal opinions in his younger years, he has recently been dubbed the 'Cardinal of Controversy', thanks to his outspoken opinions on issues like abortion and gay rights.

**Homophobic** – Homophobia is prejudice against, aversion to, or

hatred of gay people. The root of the word – phobia – means fear rather than aversion, and some have criticised the connotations of this, arguing it suggests a quasi-medical condition rather than an unjustified prejudice.

**Public Consultation** – When governments want to find out what the population thinks about a certain issue, they often make a public request for information and opinions on it. Liberal Democrat MP Lynne Featherstone

announced a public consultation on gay marriage last month: this will allow any groups with an interest in it, such as religious organisations, gay rights groups or adoption agencies, to make their views heard.

**Slippery Slope** – In ethics, a 'slippery slope' argument says that taking one action will lead to further undesirable actions. The idea is that once you start moving down a slippery slope, you can't stop until you hit the bottom.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Should gay marriage be legalised?
2. Who has the right to define what marriage means?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Write your own definition of marriage.
2. Write a reply to Cardinal O'Brien, defending same-sex marriage.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

