

## The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in Britain

### Mobilization and Opposition

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#### Abstract

One of the most contentious issues among Christian denominations today is focused upon the rights of gays within the church. Historically, Christianity has been opposed to lesbian and gay orientation in both the church and wider society. However, recent social attitudes and legislation has become more liberal regarding homosexuality. This leaves the church as one of the last bastions against the gay cause. This article considers the key issues through an examination of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in the UK. It overviews the principal aims of the movement in advancing gay rights within the church and traces its development over the last three decades. The article also considers the ways that the LGCM has mobilized its cause, not least of all its recourse to the secular language of "rights." Likewise, the article considers the strategy of conservative Christian organizations in resisting the gay movement in the churches.

#### Introduction

[1] Perhaps no other debate, apart from women's ordination, has divided the Christian community as much as that of gay rights. The measure of the controversy is cogently put by Robert Nugent and Jeannine Gramick who state: "Homosexuality may be compared to a fishbone caught in the church's throat that the church can neither eject nor swallow entirely" (7).

[2] The great number of major denominations in Britain, as in most other Western countries, have made policy statements regarding homosexuality which, if are not outrightly hostile, display an ambiguity which allows a grudging toleration of gay orientation if not gay relationships. This means that, for the most part, lesbian and gay Christians can be said to be particularly disadvantaged in that they are subject to discrimination in both wider society and ecclesiastical structures. Indeed, in terms of the extension of their rights and opportunities, the Christian church, along with the military, has proved to be one of the last bastions resisting the extension of rights within their structures (Davies; Chester and Peel).<sup>1</sup> In line with other elements of the broader gay liberation movement from the 1970s, gay Christians have sought to organize and mobilize in order to protect and extend their rights. In turn, they have been opposed by the conservative Christian constituency that is frequently organized in permanent pressure groups with a two-pronged counter attack based on religious and moral tenets: the opposition to equal rights within the churches, as well as the extension of rights in secular society as enshrined in British Parliamentary law and/or the rulings of the European Parliament and Court of Human Rights.

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<sup>1</sup> The ban of homosexuals in British armed forces was lifted in the year 2000 largely under pressure from the European Court of Human Rights. Britain thus falls into line with most other nations in the European Community.

[3] While comprehensive historical analyses of the wider gay and lesbian rights movement have been produced (e.g., Shepherd and Wallis; Weeks), few commentators have displayed an interest in the evolving parallel movement within the churches and their opposition by conservative and traditionalist elements (for an exception, see Gill 1989). Little, then, is known of their broad movement nor their achievements and set backs. Similarly, the tactics adopted by their opponents, often behind the political scenes, is under-recorded. This article considers the tactics employed by the largest gay Christian lobby in Britain, the Lesbian Gay Christian Movement (LGCM), and that of its adversaries in recent years. By utilizing a social movement perspective that seeks a synthesis of resource mobilization theory on the one hand, and labeling approaches on the other, this article attempts to understand the dynamics in operation in the conflict between the two factions. It outlines the way in which the LGCM has organized and promoted its cause. Likewise, it develops such an approach to describe and account for the level of success of the conservative constituency.

### **The Resource Mobilization Approach**

[4] The resource mobilization perspective accounts for the successes or failures of social movements in advancing their cause in the political arena. For Charles Tilly, and those who have subsequently developed his sociological framework, issues of power, conflict, and the distribution of political resources come to center stage in explaining the rise and fortunes of social movements (see Zald and McCarthy). The more successful social movements are said to be those that reach their political goals by effectively mobilizing “resources” appropriate to their situation. In simple terms, social movements are unlikely to succeed, or even get off the ground, without substantial resources that include financial assets, internal conducive organizational arrangements, human labor, effective communication, access to the mass media and the public arena, ideological tenets, and the manufacturing of a positive public image. There is also the imperative of considering the interplay between social movements and rival groups - those organizations that are capable of resisting, providing or withholding valuable resources - along with the relationship with the state in respect of legislative frameworks and indeed as a resource in itself.

[5] Little work focusing on theories of mobilization have been applied to the activities of religious groups either as political lobbyists or as movements seeking to advance their limited “religious” goals such as winning converts (see Loftland for an impressive work in this area). The adoption of this approach for understanding the fortunes of the gay Christian lobby and their opponents in Britain, as in other Western societies, is particularly pertinent since the struggle for advancement is by no means restricted to church circles but spills over into the secular political arena and overlaps with the ever-broadening agenda of civil rights.

[6] Adding another dimension to the importance of “resources” is Goode and Ben-Yahuda’s work on the construction of deviance and the social processes which lead to “deviantization.” Within their general theoretical framework, Goode and Ben-Yahuda have established a unique approach to social movements with reference to the political context of liberal democracies. Essentially, these authors regard social movements as moral communities in as much as they seek to have their values and ideologies accepted by wider society. Pluralist liberal democracies

are the ideal arenas to promote the struggle to legitimate competing moralities. At the same time, pluralist groups seek to establish their own distinctive identity and establish moral boundaries by which they are able to differentiate themselves from rival communities and interests. In short, part of the outcome of pluralist politics is to establish a positive image for the state and its legislative authorities and to win over public opinion.

[7] This process of legitimation also includes another dimension: the negative labeling or “deviantization” of rival movements. The competing moral systems of pluralist groups, whether religious or secular, will frequently attempt to apply a deviant label to others and in doing so both legitimize their own worldview for internal consumption and convince external agencies of their truth claims. The application of such a theoretical framework in providing an understanding the relative success of the gay Christian movement is fruitful and allows us to appreciate the dynamics involved in the growth and increasing legitimization of the movement. Indeed, the activities of the movement and that of its opponents, as religious constituencies, exemplifies the processes by which moral communities struggle to advance their cause. In particular, it is the negative labeling of the opposition, especially when it is amplified by public opinion, which itself becomes a “resource” in the pluralist struggle.

### **From Theological Dispute to Mobilization**

[8] Even before the establishment of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, those who sought to extend gay rights within the churches found themselves locked, since the 1960s, in a largely sterile theological debate with conservative Protestants and to a lesser extent traditional Roman Catholics.<sup>2</sup> Theologically speaking, gay Christians are largely liberal in orientation.<sup>3</sup> Most have embraced a “higher criticism” of scripture. Internally, the movement embraces an eloquent theology - forming a developing ideology which itself constitutes an important “resource.” It is one which largely focuses on Christ’s teachings of love and a call to abandon traditional family structures in favor of following the gospel and the more radical community family of the church. Homosexuality is regarded as part of the divine plan of creation; that homosexual people are present as a sign of the rich diversity of God’s work, and that the expression of homosexuality is as natural and good in every way as heterosexuality. Movements such as the LGCM have also embarked on an interpretive contextual understanding of the homophobia of biblical times and criticize the conservatives for picking and choosing the sins they censure. For instance, while homosexuality is roundly condemned, the sin of money lending and the death penalty for those who work on the Sabbath are continually ignored.

[9] Although disagreeing among themselves on many issues, the controversy of homosexuality appears to be one of those to which the great majority of conservatives Christians are united in

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<sup>2</sup> The low level of campaign for gay rights with the Catholic church results from its clear and stringent opposition from the hierarchy of the church, including papal edicts. The protestant constituency is more fragmented and pluralistic - allowing numerous views to be articulated and providing various forums that can be petitioned by both sides of the debate.

<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that all members are liberal “on all fronts.” In its early years the LGCM tried to approach the Movement for the Ordination of Women for mutual support. The latter declined, while it was also clear that some in the LGCM resisted the ordination of women (“The Enemies in the Closet,” *The Guardian* [November 10, 1992]).

opposition. This is especially so in regard to the advancement of the cause within the church. In some respect, doctrines have softened somewhat from those which viewed *both* homogenital expression and the homosexual condition/orientation as sinful and prohibited by God. Presently, gay orientation is more acceptable, homogenital behavior is not. This more restricted approach tends to play down moral responsibility. The blame for a gay orientation is thus moved from the individual to a fallen world where people are “abused” and models of homosexual behavior are evident. Despite this concession, a judgment remains regarding gay “behavior” which relies heavily on biblical texts that are conventionally understood as clearly and unequivocally condemning homosexuality. Thus, the conservative constituency has focused on the significance of a small number of biblical passages related to homosexuality, the meaning of which is regarded as clear and whose moral imperatives are asserted as binding on the church today. For the conservatives the emphasis is on a moral absolutism: the truth is self-evident and immutable.

[10] Simultaneously, there is an appeal by both the gay and anti-gay lobby to a secular legitimacy, in particular, the state and its executive and legislative components, as well as public opinion. What is particularly significant in the petition of the secular world is that it provides a marker as to how marginalized the Christian constituency has become since it is obliged to court wider non-church agencies and engage with the broader discourse on civil liberties, a principal element of which is the embrace of secular rhetoric. This position is more readily and understandably adopted by the Christian gay movement. However, it is one increasingly utilized by Conservative Christian lobby groups that are forced to endorse the logic of their opponents in order to resist them and to gain public support. While their objection to homosexuality is biblically-based, conservatives have discernibly reduced their essentially “religious” moral element in order to defend their position and to partake of the secular language and the rhetoric of rights that had long been embraced by their liberal counterparts (Davies and Hunt).

### **Gay Rights as a Secular Issue**

[11] Before considering a broad historical overview of the LGCM and its strategies, it is imperative to understand something of the secular environment in which the wider issue of gay rights is situated. In Britain, as elsewhere, the cause of gay rights has enjoyed a greater legitimacy since the permissive decade of the 1960s, although acceptance has by no means been universal and has, as we shall see, fluctuated over time. In some respects some elements of the wider Christian community in Britain were ahead of the politicians in calling for a liberalization of the law since in the Church Assembly of the Anglican church, a majority of representatives voted, albeit marginally, for the decriminalization of the homosexual act as early as 1957. The call for decriminalization was not, however, to justify the act morally.

[12] The British Parliamentary Act of 1967 (Sexual Offences Act) legalized homosexuality for those twenty-one years of age or older. Several conservative Christian groups began to mobilize themselves against such reforms in the 1970s, although the origins of some can be traced back a decade earlier in organized resistance to permissive legislation. The two principal factions - the National Festival of Light and the National Viewers and Listeners Association - condemned what they called “militant homosexuality” as a perversion of God-given sexuality and saw it as the greatest threat to family life in Britain (Parsons 1994a; 1994b).

[13] A further period of conservative mobilization occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s at the time of the governments of the Conservative Party under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. These administrations indirectly set a negative agenda regarding gays and lesbians - a task made easier by the anxiety aroused by AIDs during this period. State policy climaxed in the passage of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act (Department of Education Circular 12/88) which prohibited local authorities from allowing schools to advance what it called the “promotion of homosexuality” and from “intentionally . . . promoting homosexuality or allowing the teaching . . . of homosexuality as a pretended family relationships.” This essentially meant that sex education in schools was limited to heterosexual behavior. This was a stance which accorded closely with that of Christian fundamentalists within the churches.

[14] Since the 1997 general election the social democratic-orientated Labour Party has attempted to gain a widely based public appeal that included popular thinking in social policy including that of gay rights. A perceived greater public acceptance towards the gay cause and the aggressive stance of the gay lobby led to a further liberalization of the law, although the reforms did not include a repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act. In 1997 legislation was passed to lower the gay age of consent from 21 to 18. In 1999, the House of Lords voted against a House of Commons bill to reduce the homosexual age of consent from 18 to 16. Nonetheless, the government used the Parliamentary Act to force the bill through the Upper Chamber (The Sexual Offences Amendment Bill). Both the gay Christian movement and its opponents have mobilized resources around these issues in the realization that the liberalization of the law was likely to have a deleterious affect on the debate concerning the right of gays within the churches.

### **Historical Overview and Aims of Lesbian and Gay Movement**

[15]The LGCM was established in 1976 in order to bring together factions from different denominations and to ensure strength in numbers and organizational cohesion and focus.<sup>4</sup> From that time it has seen itself as engaged in a battle against religious homophobia. Its aims are outlined in its mission statement: to encourage support for Christian Gays and Lesbians subject to discrimination within the church;<sup>5</sup> to help the Christian church re-examine its understanding of human sexuality and to work for the positive acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships; to witness the Christian faith within the gay community at large; and to maintain and strengthen links internationally with other gay and lesbian Christian groups (LGCM 1986; n.d.a). There is also a wider agenda, and at this point there is close interaction with the broader gay movement both nationally and internationally. For example, the LGCM has campaigned to bring to Britain full recognition of gay marriages and full equality for gays, as is the case in Holland.

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<sup>4</sup> Denominations still continue with their own internal lobbying factions. For instance, the Anglican church has the Changing Attitude network and the Alliance of Lesbian and Gay Anglicans, which mark a response to the 1998 Lambeth conference resolution. There are also autonomous church-based organizations such as Safety Net, a web site offering support for gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered Christians. A similar function is performed by Safe Space which operates at the annual Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival.

<sup>5</sup> LGCM runs a swift response e-mail mailing list (“Action Alert”) in an attempt to highlight cases of discrimination and to mobilize support at times when Christian sponsorship becomes a major issue. Victims of “church homophobia” are invited to ring a hotline with stories

[16] The LGCM's history has been a relatively short and arduous one, and the movement has usefully outlined its own evolution and history through various stages (Gill 1989: 2-102). Firstly, there were the founding years (1976-77) in which the LGCM sought to find its voice in church circles and establish its own identity, and to offer support to those who felt discriminated against within the church. The climate of opinion in the churches at this time, with notable exceptions such as the more liberal minded Quakers, was strongly anti-gay.

[17] Next came the years of relative growth and progress (1977-84). During this period the LGCM established a central organization, set up a number of local groups in many of Britain's principal towns and cities,<sup>6</sup> worked out its own ethics and spirituality, and developed relations with the wider gay community. This stage is recognized by the LGCM as one of sustained advancement. Several developments led to this period being regarded as successful. First, the LGCM catered to the needs of its members by offering help and counseling to those who experienced emotional and psychological stress as a result of social and ecclesiastical prejudice and ostracism. Second, the LGCM articulated theological and ethical statements, especially relating to same-sex relationships. Third, the LGCM created an inclusive movement in terms of males and females, by denomination, and all those who wished to support the key objectives of the movement.

[18] As it became more visible and active the LGCM was subject to a backlash from within the church (1985-88) and, since 1987, because of internal criticism and the tendency to be male dominated, the movement changed its name to include the word "lesbian." This was accompanied by the development of a distinctly lesbian theology born out of women's experiences.

[19] The evidence of a conservative backlash was abundantly clear in the Church of England Synod in 1987 when a motion to drive gay clergy out of the church was passed, despite vigorous lobbying by the LGCM, though with amendments which allowed bishops to draw back from a full-time purge. The wider political climate, three Thatcherite administrations, and the AIDS panic also strengthened the opposition to the movement. Against this background, conservative Christian groups began to mobilize against the LGCM.

[20] Finally, the period since the late 1980s is seen by the movement itself as one of continued advancement. It challenged institutionalized homophobia more confidently, while many churches appeared to increasingly accept the legitimacy of debate if not the cause of the LGCM (Gill 1989: 48). This stage has been described as a time when the movement was going from "strength to strength" (Gill 1989: 72). The LGCM thus emerged from a difficult few years and set about strengthening its organizational structures and redoubling its campaigning work. One fruitful development was the establishment by the LGCM of the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality. Its primary aim was to facilitate education and discussion of all aspects of human sexuality within the broad Christian community. This marked an attempt to promote a respectable image through projecting a concern with all forms of sexuality.

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<sup>6</sup> There are, for example 23, diocese support groups in the Anglican church.

[21] A second development at this time was the increasing maturity and activity of local grass-root groups. Some 30 groups had emerged with the primary function of supporting gay people in their needs. In 1994 the national committee introduced a special small grant to help local groups engage in projects in their local areas. It is a measure of the success of LGCM's caucuses that they have borne an increasing part of the burden of confronting what was perceived as prejudice and attempting to transform attitudes within their respective denominations. This was harder for some than others, particularly so for Roman Catholic gays who discovered their church staunchly defending the traditional stance against homosexuality. Other churches found the subject uncomfortable to handle and, as in the case of the Methodist denomination, major divisions of opinion ensued. The outcome of such hard-fought battles in the churches, although partial and uneven, gave the LGCM plenty of cause to celebrate the achievements of its first twenty years in 1996. This was marked with a thanksgiving service in Southwark Cathedral. The reaction of the conservatives was predictable in attempting, but subsequently failing, to have the service banned.

[22] Persecution continued despite notable advances. In 1998, the 750 bishops of the world-wide Anglican church meeting in Canterbury for their ten-yearly Lambeth conference made their harshest condemnation of homosexuality to date, with the passing of a resolution rejecting homosexual practices as "incompatible with Scripture" and that "abstinence is right for those who are not called for marriage." The debate was at the top of the agenda for many participants against a background of bitterness and recrimination on all sides and an atmosphere which one bishop later compared to a Nazi rally (*The Guardian* [November 11, 2000]).<sup>7</sup>

### **Gay Christian Mobilization**

[23] Both the LGCM and its conservative enemies have sought to mobilize resources inside and outside of the church. This has included the search for internal unity and the manufacturing of a positive public image, besides the mobilization of the more material resources of people and fund-raising campaigns. As far as the LCGM is concerned, there has been an appeal to wider universal principles within the framework of the extension of civil liberties, thus portraying conservative Christians as contrary and opposed to enlightened secular developments. The language of rights is also keenly advanced with reference to "minority rights" as this extract from the LGCM web pages suggests"

It is only when homosexuals or black people or women stand up and demand just treatment and challenge prejudices, that any change is possible. When they do this of course they must expect abuse and ridicule, such has always been the case, but justice is worth a fight (2002).

[24] During the November General Synod in 1999, the LGCM published the report *Christian Homophobia* on alleged Christian discrimination against homosexuals. The report claimed that the words and actions of Christian churches support most of the homophobic abuse suffered in Britain by gays and lesbians. It claimed that the churches have a disproportionate influence on

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<sup>7</sup> The LGCM's own conference in 1999 called "After Lambeth" attracted 270 people including 12 bishops and official representatives of 32 dioceses. The conference was intended to spur further action within the Anglican Church (*Church Times* [February 12, 1999]).

legislation affecting gay and lesbian people and have “tried to defy the will of parliament and the international consensus on human rights.” The report went on to maintain that a significant number of clergy had been dismissed and made homeless and reduced to living on state benefits because of their sexuality.

[25] The *Christian Homophobia* report made 74 recommendations for good practice. Several of the most significant that refer to the universal principles of liberties are as follows. First, that national and regional church bodies should develop and implement a “fully inclusive equal-opportunities policy” with reference to lesbians and gay men. Second, that language should be inclusive and make no distinctions between “Christians” and lesbian and gay men in church literature and liturgy. Third, that all church posts should be advertized in the lesbian and gay press, and all existing staff should receive training in homophobia awareness similar to the racism-awareness training that is now beginning to be implemented. Fourth, that all churches should make available same-sex blessings, and liturgical bodies should begin the process of approving services for these. Finally, that theological colleges should “provide students with the exegetical tools to combat biblically based homophobia.”

[26] The LGCM has also been active in a counter campaign against the conservatives. This strategy both legitimizes the worldview of the movement in order to strengthen internal boundaries and to convince external agencies of their truth claims. It is, in short, a form of reversed stigmatization against those who would stigmatize the gay cause. Although the stereotyping of the anti-gay lobby tends to blur the distinction between different brands of Christians or even between different types of “evangelicals,” this kind of deviant label is a highly effective resource in the cause of the gay movement when successfully applied. The struggle with the conservative constituency involves portraying them as crude fundamentalists comparable with the American Christian Right; they are portrayed as ignorant, bigoted, reactionary, marginalized, and opposed to basic human rights.

[27] As part of this battle against the conservatives another significant initiative was the creation in 1979 of a separate Evangelical Fellowship within the LGCM. A meeting of 25 evangelicals led to the formation of the new group that arose partly out of a sense that the evangelical voice was not adequately heard in a movement which was traditionally dominated by liberal theologies. It thus marked a recognition that evangelicalism constituted one of the bastions of opposition to gay and lesbian liberation, and for that reason evangelical Christians faced particular difficulties in seeking to reconcile their faith and their sexuality. Thus, the group was potentially well-directed to work amongst the gay movement’s many arch-enemies in the evangelical wing of the church as a whole.

[28] There have been other developments, however, which weigh against the LGCM. One limitation is related to the question of how far the interests and concerns of gay men and lesbians are sufficiently comparable to be held together in one organization. This dilemma has impacted all gay campaigning groups since the 1970s. Yet, the LGCM has succeeded, where many gay liberation movements have failed, in holding its different constituencies together by the creation

of separate Methodist, United Reformed, and Roman Catholic caucuses and separate groups for young people and for women.<sup>8</sup>

[29] Ecumenical in outlook, the LGCM has sought to maintain cooperative relations with other lesbian and gay Christian organizations, as well as with other gay and lesbian lobbying groups. Contacts have been opened up on a global scale, including with parallel groups in Europe, South Africa, and North America. Nonetheless, the aim of encouraging members to witness their faith in the gay movement has presented the stiffest challenge. The problem has been that of image. Many members of the gay world had little time for religion and regarded the church as one of the prime generators of homophobia in British society. The negative label of the Christian church's mentality was thus applied by the gay community to the LGCM.

[30] Many in the broader gay movement resented the Christian evangelizing mission. This meant that it is probably accurate to describe gay and lesbian Christians as isolated in both their identity communities.<sup>9</sup> Inside the church the opposition came from conservatives and traditionalists. Outside the church many in the lesbian/gay community see gay Christian activists as dupes and masochists engaged in a neurotic and meaningless struggle. Some go further and scorn the believer's activism as an obstacle to the building of a distinctive gay spirituality (with strong New Age tendencies) that is distinct from a limited Christian one. Those who critique the lesbian and gay Christians' enterprise regard a more appropriate goal to be a self-consciously gay/lesbian identity and presence; whether it is to assert normality, facilitate acceptance and secure rights, or to cultivate Christian homosexual uniqueness and independence, the goals of the LGCM are viewed as counter productive.

[31] The attempt by a LGCM delegate to speak at the end of the 1976 Gay Pride march was met, to say the least, with hostility and, since 1981, Gay's the Word bookshop has refused to stock the LGCM's more moderate and "Christian" literature. The matter of relationship with the gay community has also weakened the internal unity and cohesion of the LCGM. Some members believe in more confrontational politics, although to date LGCM has not followed the tactics of OutRage! - the broader gay movement's "storm troopers" - in "outing" gay bishops, however much it supports the activists' objectives. Nonetheless, the leadership has steered the movement in a more radical direction in order to engage with traditional attitudes. From its inception the LGCM displayed a more direct campaigning stance, such as the interruption of church services, which has attracted the most public attention and controversy. Not all the organization's early members were happy with these tactics, and some advocated a low-key approach which offered fellowship and support rather than high-profile pressure tactics. Other members regarded the emphasis on a separate "Christian" gay identity as unnecessarily polemical and divisive.

[32] One way in which the LGCM could court friendship with the wider gay community was to earn the trust of those suspicious of religious motivation by making common cause with their

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<sup>8</sup> Some of these groups place great faith in the teaching of their own denomination, and in particular many place faith in the official teachings of the Roman Catholic church. As a general statement, gay and lesbian Christians tend not to work outside of the religious traditions to which they belong (Fischer: 172).

<sup>9</sup> The cause of the LGCM is occasionally, but tentatively, discussed on the gay press (see Gill 1996).

struggles. For instance, in 1976 the LGCM made a submission to the policy advisory committee of the Criminal Law Revision Committee arguing for an equal age of consent for homosexuals and heterosexuals, and reinforcing the arguments put forward by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. However, it was probably the events of 1984 that showed in the most striking way possible that Christian and non-Christian gay and lesbian people did in fact have a commonality of interests in what they perceived as a homophobic society. Between April and October of that year the British Customs and Excise seized books, newspapers, and magazines that had been imported for sale in gay bookshops. The action resulted in the seizure of 15 copies of the *Joy of Gay Sex* which LGCM had ordered as part of its mail order service. The LGCM and the wider gay constituency joined together in raising funds and preparing to mount court actions before Customs and Excise finally relented and returned the books.

### **Conservative Resistance**

[33] A key question is why some conservative groups do not limit themselves to restricting gay rights within the church; instead, they are also concerned with stopping the advancement of rights in the wider secular society. The simple answer is that the extension of the latter obviously puts pressure on the churches who may have to heed secular legislation in such areas of equal opportunity in employment and job promotion. Yet, there is more to consider and it relates to what Thompson refers to as the “Ezekiel factor” (169-70). In short, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel warns that, no matter how devout they are, God’s people cannot stand aside seeking personal salvation while God’s judgment falls upon others. Unless, they “blow the trumpet,” the blood of the fallen will be upon the believer’s head. Attempting to prevent people from sinning by lobbying for legislative change is part of this agenda including, if possible, the criminalization of the homosexual act.

[34] The upsurge of prejudice within British society against the gay cause in the 1980s brought a new sense of unity and direction for the conservative Christian constituency. The Christian Right played a significant part in the articulation of that discourse, with the LGCM constituting a major target of attack. In many respects the conservative movement was the counterpart to the Christian Right in the USA, which began with the creation of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority in 1979 as a reaction against the moral and political ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. Arguing that American society was morally and socially endangered by a tide of abortion, feminism, homosexuality, and secularism, the “born-again” Christian Right made a significant contribution to the support which swept Ronald Reagan to power in 1980. A similar process, though on a much smaller scale, occurred in Britain with the creation of the conservative Christian lobby that organized against pornography, abortion, euthanasia, and other issues.

[35] When it comes to battling against gay Christian activity there are arguably three conservative groupings. The LGCM are well aware of the distinctions between these groups and have frequently produced literature advising members how to deal with what is perceived as different kinds of threats. The first are small-scale fringe groups, not especially well-organized, based around particularly active individuals, autonomous churches, or small organizations which include the Intercessors For Britain, Facts Matter, the Conservative Christian Fellowship, and the Anglo-Catholic group Cost of Conscience and Reform. The members of the latter group have

threatened to withhold their dues if the Anglican church accepts practicing gay and lesbian clergy. The majority of these factions simply utilize fundamentalist biblical material aimed at outlining same-sex relations as a sin. Alternatively, there are the ex-gay groups which include Courage, True Freedom Trust, Turning Point, and Pilot, which follow in the footsteps of the National Festival of Light in setting up a number of agencies which claimed to “cure” repentant gay men by the power of prayer. This activity amounts to a kind of spiritual aversion therapy which contradicts the growing body of scientific evidence about the early and largely unalterable formation of sexual orientation. These groups are of a very mixed bag. Some use “reparative therapy” or other techniques to “cure” homosexuality “through the power of the Holy Spirit,” whereas others, including evangelical groups such as Ellet Ministries, offer a broader “healing” ministry that involves prayer, healing, laying on of hands, or deliverance (exorcism) “from homosexuality.”<sup>10</sup>

[36] What the LGCM refers to as “Serious Campaigning Groups” (n.d.b) is recognized as the third and most forceful and resourceful enemy. These groups are usually registered as companies and charities with a large and easily mobilized support base and include the Christian Institute, Christian Action Research and Education (CARE), the Maranatha Trust, and the Evangelical Alliance. These groups have all produced literature painting a lurid picture of Britain since the permissive society of the 1960s, its perceived moral decline, and the serious political economic consequences. This is compared to the strong Christian commitment of the Victorian period. Each group has set out to combat what they saw in the 1970s onwards as “the moral pollution” in British life. They have mobilized themselves for pluralist politics and thus accept the legitimacy of democratic politics and processes to further their aims.

### **Conservative Mobilization**

[37] Various resources have been adopted by the anti-gay constituency. The more obvious campaigning techniques are lobbying, demonstrations, and counter demonstrations. Petition MPs in both Parliamentary chambers have been the most direct assault on the gay cause, and the defeat by the House of Lords against lowering the age of consent has been at least partly attributed by some conservative groups to their own lobbying (CARE). More militant action has come from organizations like Reform which, concerned with the Church of England’s acceptance and tacit approval of the LGCM, have encouraged churches to protest at the use of church property (for meetings of LGCM) by withholding payment of their quota from the diocese. There are other tactics besides these perhaps more obvious ones and many involve a process of deviantization (see below).

[38] Most of the main political parties in Britain already have informal caucuses of conservative Christians within them. Yet, the attitude of the conservative religious lobby and the views of the Conservative governments from 1979 through the 1980s on gayness, breakdown of the family, and single parent families brought no straightforward alliance during the greatest period of reactionary backlash. The group which approximates most closely to the political aims and

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<sup>10</sup> Those who claim to be “healed” of their sexual perversion often witness to their transformation by turning up in chat rooms on gay web sites.

methods of the American Christian Right was the Conservative Family Campaign founded in 1986, which numbered ten Conservative members of the House of Commons and one Anglican bishop among its supporters. It also claimed to have the support of 24 members of the House of Lords.

[39] The development of effective lobbying skills to influence non-Christian members of Parliament has been a major plank of the Christian Right's strategy. Senior politicians are courted, brought on side, and then offered material assistance in terms of information, researchers, and consultants for policy issues on which they share a common concern. Both the Christian Institute and CARE operate in this way within the House of Commons and Lords. As charities bearing the name "Christian," senior politicians are often pleased to become trustees or non-executive directors, and this increases the lobbying and networking power of these groups.

[40] Secondly and relatedly, the anti-gay lobby makes use of databases and the management of "people resources." The LGCM argues that there is some evidence to suggest that the names of people supporting and opposing the cause were passed on from one separate conservative group to another in different parts of the country. Individuals known to oppose abortion or pornography might be asked to sign up to the anti-gay cause. The Internet is another growing resource for the Christian Right and the conservatives are swiftly learning the benefits of a free flow of information for recruiting potential supporters.

[41] Thirdly, critics within the church have amplified the deviance of the Christian gay lobby. Perhaps this is most obviously achieved by promoting the view that the LGCM is outside the historical teachings of the church. They argue that true Christians are "committed to promoting the historic Christian teaching that all sexual activity outside of marriage is morally wrong" (Christian Institute 2002). At the same time the conservative constituency links the LGCM with promoting promiscuity, pornography, pedophilia, sadomasochism, and proscribed drugs, all of which are portrayed as posing a public threat. This has included the use of fairly emotive and provocative language. The literature produced by the Christian Institute points out that the terminology used in British law includes frequent reference to "buggery" and more explicitly "obscene behavior" to describe gay sex anal sex (1997/8: 15). Concerns about AIDs since the early 1980s has also been used by conservatives to attack the gay community with claims that "true" Christians wished permissive legislation to be revoked. If AIDs was not God's judgment, it was at least a discernible repercussion for breaking his laws (see Gill 1989: 66).<sup>11</sup>

[42] The LGCM is also castigated for its part with the wider gay movement in condoning promiscuity through its literature and book sales, including such controversial texts as *The Joy of Gay Sex* and *The A-Z of Gay Sex*. The latter was seized from the LGCM by customs because of its pornographic content, but was returned on a technicality of European law. Also by way of example, the Christian Institute has made much of the LGCM's Internet publication of the work *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name*, a poem that was one of only two pieces of literature

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<sup>11</sup> The Christian Institute is keen to produce scientific evidence here: "The risk of HIV infection from anal intercourse is extremely high: for men it is at least 2700 times the risk from vaginal intercourse" (2002, quoting Public Health Laboratories, Communicable disease report, July 1997). The Christian Institute also points out that all the major world religions are opposed to homosexuality (2002).

this century adjudged “blasphemous” by a UK court. It portrays the centurion guarding the tomb of Christ indulging in sexual acts with his dead body and attributes homosexual inclinations to Christ himself (Christian Institute 2002). Finally, the conservatives have advanced the propagandist view that some churches are being used as “pick-up points” for homosexuals under the façade of LGCM meetings.

[43] While the LGCM are deviantized, the conservative constituency promotes itself as guardians of public good and supporters of the majority view. Hence, it points to the findings of opinion polls

as evidence that gay sex at sixteen was deeply unpopular . . . not morally equivalent to heterosexual intercourse, with considerably increased medical risks, and that homosexuality is something which sets people apart from the rest of society. . . (There is) the desperation of parents whose sons have been lost to a life in the “gay scene” (Calvert 1998: 11-14).

The Christian Institute advance the view that a change in the law of consent is not supported by the British public, pointing out that according to British Social Attitudes, the most respected survey of public opinion, some 70 percent of the British population oppose it and a similar percentage consider that homosexual practices are “always or mostly wrong” (1997/8: 15).

[44] Fourthly, it is evident that conservative groups have come to realize that biblical quotes and theological arguments do not strike a cord with the public at large nor politicians, even though their primary objection might be theological. Biblical and theological language is notably absent from the publications of such groups as the Christian Institute, CARE, and Intercessors for Britain. This realization has enabled such groups to fight on the relatively new front of public policy and to have a greater ecumenical breadth. By emulating USA American Religious Right lobbying, these groups are able to cross ecumenical boundaries free from some of the internal politics and policies of a particular denomination.

[45] More recently, the anti-gay movement has utilized the language of rights with statements such as “religious freedom under threat” to address such issues as Christian education in schools. The Christian Institute, while claiming to be “eager that the rights of minorities should be protected,” extends this to the rights of children to be protected “by preventing the promotion of homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality.” Similarly, the rights of the family are advanced “by showing children the centrality of marriage and the family to the fabric of society” (n.d.a; see also Calvert 1997: 4). In an attempt to support women’s rights, a band of miscellaneous conservative protesters handed out anti-gay leaflets at the Lambeth conference of the Anglican church in 1998 proclaiming that “homosexual practices are a diabolically deviant act and an unnatural discrimination against womankind.”

[46] On the other hand, the conservatives have been prepared to utilize moral arguments against the rights issue as this extract from the Christian Institutes states:

The LGCM talk of “rights” and “equality for homosexuals.” They refer to homosexuals as “downtrodden”<sup>12</sup> and compare their opponents to the bigoted hate mongers of the American deep south during the black civil rights campaigns. However, Christians represented by groups such as *Reform* and Anglo-Catholic group *Cost of Conscience*, feel bound to the Bible’s clear injunction against homosexual practice. . . [I]f we accept a homosexual “Christian” movement, there is no reason why we should not also have an adulterer’s Christian fellowship and a sex-before marriage Christian fellowship (2001: 1).<sup>13</sup>

[47] Fifthly, for the conservatives, gay orientation is deemed as generally acquired or learned, and not a result of genetic predisposition. By taking such an argument they challenge the so-called scientific evidence produced by the LGCM. Thus the opposing factions make great use of scientific or pseudo-scientific evidence. The LGCF fall back on the evidence of the genetic basis of homosexuality such as that produced by the United States National Cancer Institute (research still its early stages) which indicates that 82 percent of gay men carry a marker, the Xq28, on the X chromosome.

[48] In opposition, the Christian Right promotes the view that homosexuality is either a lifestyle choice or a psychological illness (and therefore treatable by therapy). For instance, in response to the gay gene theory, the Christian Institute resists any notion that gay men and women are “born that way”:

Teenage boys can be confused about their sexual attractions. They can go through a phase of being attracted to those of the same sex, but in the vast majority of cases they simply grow out of it and develop normal attraction for women (LGCM n.d.b: 3, quoting the Christian Institute’s *Bankrolling Gay Proselytism* [1999]).

For the conservatives, there is no conclusive evidence that genetic or hormonal factors are causative in homosexual behavior. Neither, we are told, is the human body designed for homosexual intercourse. Thus, like all other sinners, homosexuals should be welcomed into the church, and “someone found with whom they can talk with frankly and pray” (Christian Institute 2002).

[49] Finally, Christian Right groups in Britain, as in the United States, are skilled in presenting themselves as quasi-academic or research bodies. They employ staff and often carry out what is frequently referred to as research in public policy areas. The use of terms such as “research” or “policy” in their titles suggests that these groups are respectable and offer a public service and deflect attention away from their primarily religious and biblically-literal agenda. These groups frequently rely on a small group of “born-again” researchers, doctors, and academics. This shift

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<sup>12</sup> Referring to the secretary of the LGCM, Richard Kirker, who was quoted in *New Christian Herald* (November 23, 1996)

<sup>13</sup> The LGCM has set out to vigorously to combat such views, taking part in December 1985 in the formation of the Aids Faith Alliance in conjunction with the Metropolitan Community Church and Quest, and the Roman Catholic gay and lesbian support group.

of emphasis has wooed supporters who otherwise might want to separate themselves from the Christian conservatives. The objective and serious image which the conservative Right attempts to cultivate for itself is backed up by the quasi-academic use of statistics. Moreover, there is also the trend to misuse otherwise reputable research. This can backfire, however, if findings are proved to be false. One alleged fact produced by this constituency is the myth of the “gay lifespan” based on spurious research (such as the discredited research of Paul Cameron which has been rejected by both the American Sociological Association and the American Psychological Society (LGCM n.d.b)).<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

[50] This article has sought to utilize a broad resource mobilization approach in order to understand the dynamics of power and conflict between the Christian gay lobby and its conservative adversaries. It has attempted to show how the utilization of various resources have mitigated for and against the objectives of these groupings. The dynamics of internal organization, ideology, material resources, and the “deviantization” of the opposition, have all played their part in the competitive politics of the last three decades. This article has recognized that the state and public opinion, as rightfully the case in a liberal democracy, constitute the arena in which legitimate political activity takes place and that these may feed back on the activities of competing parties of a religious nature.

[51] At the beginning of the twenty-first century it might appear that the honors are about even in the advocacy and opposition to gay Christian rights. Within their denominational communities religious conservatives and fundamentalists have largely blocked the full participation of openly gay and lesbian believers in virtually every denomination. Yet, the Christian gay movement could claim a level of success. At present, however, the future prospects for the anti-gay Christian constituency appear to be limited. To some extent this is because, unlike their adversaries, the conservatives factions are not single-issues groups. This has advantages in that homosexuality can be addressed in the literature alongside what may broadly be perceived as public threats including drugs, abortion, pornography, and the breakdown of the family. In comparison, however, the LGCM is more focused and pours all of its resources into promoting one issue. This has enhanced the movement’s sense of cohesion that could have otherwise been weakened by simultaneously advancing other liberal causes such as the ordination of women priests.

[52] There is something more fundamental to consider. In many ways, the aim of the NCR to bring a religious revival and reversal of the permissive and increasingly materialistic and individualistic society that has evolved from the 1960s seems particularly unrealistic. Reforms are not easy to instigate. Neither are they likely to be subject to wholesale repeal.

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<sup>14</sup> Research conducted by conservative groups play down the extent of homosexual activity. For instance, the Christian Institute puts exclusive homosexual activity in Britain at a mere 0.3% (n.d.b). More cautious estimates put homosexual activity at 1.1 percent (Parsons 1994c). The gay lobby has consistently estimated homosexual activity to be somewhere between 10-15 percent of the population (*Daily Mail* [January 21, 1994]).

[53] Most conservative politicians in Britain have little interest in the religious lobby. The attempts of the Christian Right to influence the outcome of general elections over some three decades by appealing to religious moralism has proved ineffectual. In part, this may be because conservative Christians are operating within an increasingly secular society, but in attempting to mobilize support for their goals religious organizations are less effective than secular organizations because of their tendency to follow vague, universal, and usually moral goals which, in many respects, are often abstract, unattainable, and unwinnable.

[54] The pluralism of society in the United States, against which the U.S. Christian Right has reacted, in the end limited its chances of success since it was opposed by powerful liberal forces. In Britain the likely political impact of the Christian Right is even less, and its organizational structure far from impressive. While the appeal of Christian moralism in Britain is by no means negligible, there has been no significant legislative change on so-called moral matters for several reasons: Levels of religious participation in Britain are lower than in the United States; the use of the media for televangelism and other religious programming has been resisted; and the federal system of devolved political power, which had made it possible for Christian groups to score significant political success at local levels in the United States, does not exist in Britain.

[55] It is interesting to note that the relationship of the conservative Christian lobby with the state has had a peculiar consequence, for in many respects the concerns of conservative Christian groups have been utilized to political advantage. In order to counter the charge that rising rates of poverty and crime in the 1980s were the consequence of Conservative government policy, the conservative Christian rhetoric was used to blame these social ailments on the so-called collapse of traditional family values and moral standards in the 1960s. The restoration of a supposedly traditional morality, rather than targeted government expenditure to help the poor - which would have involved higher rates of taxation for the rich - was held up as the universal panacea for this social breakdown. This development showed that those who seek to influence the state might find themselves as part of the state's propaganda. Political forces may turn and act upon lobbying constituencies in negative and positive ways.

[56] The impact of conservative Christians in reversing gay reforms inside and outside the church has been limited. The LGCM has succeeded in putting gay rights within the church very much on the agenda. The year 1979 saw the publication of three separate reports on homosexuality, by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches, and all three affirmed the value of gay relations. Even though none of the reports were unequivocal in their acceptance of the value of gay sex, they marked a recognition that the controversy was not disappearing. The reports recognized that homosexuality was "natural" to some, but that they should abstain from practice. Alternatively, some denominations have taken the position that there was a distinction between what the law should permit and what the church considered morally acceptable. Certainly, the debate regarding the legitimacy of the gay cause is not merely a polarization between the pros and cons. There exists a variety of positions between them including the view that gay Christians should not be excommunicated and that Christians can honorably disagree.

[57] Perhaps above all, the cause of the LGCM is much in line with developments in the political world in that the enhancement of gay rights is seen in increasing liberal legislation. This means

that conservative Christian groups within the church at large are in a difficult if not unsustainable position. In forging public opinion, as much as reflecting it, the British state is a powerful determinant especially when it has to fall in line with the recommendations of international agencies such as the European Community. Ultimately, the pressure by the LGCM for the churches to fully accept gay and lesbian orientation as legitimate may be successful. Rather ironically, that victory may not come through the activities of the LGCM or similar movements but via the legal requirements of secular society and public opinion that will identify the church as “out of sync” with the culture and ethos of the modern world.

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