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The Lincoln Letters: A Study in Institutional Change

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Abstract

On Friday 2nd September 2016, The Guardian published an online article entitled 'Bishop of Grantham first C of E bishop to declare he is in a gay relationship.' In response, a large quantity of correspondence was sent to the Bishop from members of the public, the vast majority expressing support. In this paper, we set the empirical data contained in the letters themselves within a context of continuing change in both society and the Church of England. We consider the reactions of the Church at the 'tipping points' of social change as it seeks to balance its responsibilities as a guardian of 'truth' with the need to keep in touch with modern ways of living. A key concept underpinning our analysis will be the notion of 'vicarious religion', which deals with the subtle but continuing relationships between the actively faithful and a wider body of more loosely attached adherents.

Keywords

Anglican, Britain, Christianity, clergy, document analysis, religion, sexualities

Introduction

> Dear Father, I feel neither of us are prolific letter writers, or campaigners of any sort, but there are some occasions where the need to write becomes overwhelming. The revelation regarding your personal life over the weekend, we feel, is such an occasion…The fact that such a statement can make every news bulletin for two days running on all major UK channels may mean the Church of England isn't as irrelevant as we thought it was! (Letter 503)

On Friday 2nd September 2016, Nicholas Chamberlain, the Bishop of Grantham, announced that he was gay and in a relationship – the first Church of England bishop to do so publically. The declaration, which was published online in The Guardian, was followed over the weekend by a handful of short media appearances on national radio and television, subsequently repeated on local and world-service networks, and discussed on social media.[1] The catalyst for the Bishop's declaration and his public media appearances was his threatened 'outing' by a Sunday newspaper.[2] Within four days of the media attention, 410 pieces of mail addressed either to the Bishop or to the Lincoln Diocesan office arrived, the vast majority (over 90%) expressing support for the Bishop's position. Almost 100 more arrived in the next few weeks.[3] The Bishop's personal journey, lived out in the public eye, inspired an outpouring of support from friends, current and former parishioners, clergy, and strangers, many of whom had no particular religious affiliation or connection to the Church of England.

[1] The Guardian article is available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/02/nicholas-chamberlain-bishop-of-grantham-c-of-e-gay-relationship. The media appearances included the BBC national news and an interview on Radio 4's Sunday programme.

[2] Why 'outing a bishop' is considered newsworthy is, of course, a question in its own right. It cannot be explored in depth in this article but raises important issues for the churches, the media, their readers and the society of which they are part.

[3] Social media networks were also active and their content was equally positive; these sources are not covered in this article.

Intrigued by this unsolicited and unexpectedly positive response, the Bishops of Lincoln and Grantham asked us to look at this corpus of material.[4] Our task was to make sociological sense of its content. Specifically we were asked to explore who the letter writers were, their reasons for writing, and their principal arguments. A short report was prepared for the College of Bishops for use within the Church of England.[5] This article takes a broader view and sets this episode and the letters themselves within a context of continuing change in both society and the church – specifically the Church of England. The distinctive identity of this Church and its relationship both to British (more specifically English) society, and to the wider Anglican Communion, will be central to the discussion.[6]

We interrogate three overlapping questions. The first relates to the wider society and a whole series of moral or ethical changes that have taken place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The marked shift in societal attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships forms part of a continuing trajectory; it is not an isolated episode. The second question considers the reactions of the churches to such changes as they seek to balance their responsibilities as guardians of the sacred with the need to keep in touch with modern ways of living. The letters speak powerfully to the existence and (non-)resolution of these tensions. The final question is a little different and relates to the decision-making

[4] For the record, one of us is a practising Anglican; the other has a different faith commitment. The complementarity proved helpful in reflecting on our material.

[5] The Lincoln Letters: A Report for the College of Bishops (August 2017).

[6] See Mark Chapman, Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) for an introduction to the Church of England, its place in English society and in the Anglican Communion. More developed accounts can be found in Mark Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke and Martyn Percy, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Paul Avis, The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology (London: T and T Clark International, 2008).

process itself and focusses on the Church of England in particular. The discussion pays attention as much to institutional constraints as it does to doctrinal issues. A key concept in this analysis will be the notion of 'vicarious religion', which deals with the subtle but continuing relationships between the actively faithful and a wider body of more loosely-attached adherents. The idea is particularly relevant to the first and second questions outlined above in that it pivots on the relationship between churches and the societies of which they are part.

This is a substantial and unexpected body of material that demands careful sociological analysis, but we must be clear from the outset about the limitations of these data. This is not a representative sample of Church of England members as a whole, or, indeed, of English society. The letters are from a self-selecting group of people (albeit a surprising number of them) who have chosen to express their personal views on homosexuality and same-sex relationships (both within and without the Church) in response to a specific issue that garnered national and international media attention. Yet, despite this caveat, the vast majority of the letters hold in common a particular motivation – a desire for the Church of England to respond inclusively towards non-heteronormative sexualities, on behalf of the population it exists to serve. Here, in personal and in many ways intimate correspondence, the authors are not only calling the Church to account, but willing Church leaders to navigate this complex terrain correctly, in what the great majority of them perceive as the best interests of wider society. Alongside individual stories, these letters reveal a particular way of relating to the established Church within a context that has borne witness to a decline of formal Anglican affiliation.[7]

[7] Grace Davie, Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

As such, they are a unique dataset with which to conduct sociological analysis into the role of religion, and specifically the role of the Church of England, in late modern society. They complement and should be read alongside the growing body of data, both quantitative and qualitative, on what is sometimes termed the Anglican penumbra or 'silent majority' – a diminishing but none the less significant constituency in English life.[8]

The approach in this article is inductive. It begins with a brief account of the methodology used in the analysis of the letters, followed by an introduction to the letters themselves, their authors and their reasons for writing. Only then – and guided by the letters – does it engage the three questions outlined above, seeing each of these as contributions to a broader understanding of social and institutional change. A final question cannot be avoided: what will be the next challenge for late modern societies and the churches that exist within them? To assume that the debate about same sex relationships is a final or definitive issue is hardly credible. It is important therefore to look forward as well as back in order to gain a better understanding of what is at stake.

Analysing the letters: method, writers, and motives

In total, 508 letters, emails, and cards (hereafter known as the 'letters') were given to us for analysis.[9] Each letter was numbered. Fifteen letters were then removed from the

[8] See Grace Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Grace Davie, Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); Abby Day, Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead, That was the Church that was: How the Church of England Lost the English People (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[9] Clearly this was a body of material that needed to be handled with care, for which reason the ethics procedures of the Universities of Exeter and Leeds were meticulously followed. Each letter, moreover, was redacted by the Diocese of Lincoln prior to being sent to use in order to maintain the anonymity of the authors. In addition the Diocesan Office wrote to each of the authors to seek their consent for involvement in this study.

sample: four were not related to the issue in question; four were repeats; four were requests from journalists or researchers; and three were insufficiently clear to be included. This left a total of 493 pieces of correspondence. Using systematic content and document analysis, which involved close and careful reading (and re-reading) of all the letters, codes were drawn out of the data by hand, relating to the locations of the letter writers; their genders, occupations, and religious affiliations; their motives for writing and their rationale.[10] Before we consider the detail of this correspondence and its implications for our three research questions, we will present an overview of the letters, their authors and primary motivations.

Who wrote the letters?

Gender and Age

Of the 493 individual letters to Bishop Nicholas, 235 were written by men, 120 were written by women, 22 were from a man and a woman writing together, four were from two men writing together, four were from a mixed-gender family, and 10 were from a community or congregation.[11] The gender of the remaining authors was unknown.

[10] Both authors worked collaboratively to draw out the codes and conduct the analysis. Although undertaking this exercise by hand was time-consuming, it allowed us to be closer to the data and therefore develop a greater sense of the contents and key themes within the cache of letters. In approaching the data in this way, we drew on previous work undertaken by one of the authors. See Grace Davie, 'Seeing Salvation: The Use of Data as Text in the Sociology of Religion', in Paul Avis ed., Public Faith? The State of Religious Belief and Practice in Britain (London: SPCK, 2003), pp. 28-44; David Wyatt and Grace Davie, 'Document Analysis', in Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler eds., The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 151-60. Our intention is to publish a second article on the Lincoln Letters which focuses solely on method.

[11] We have not included these figures as a percentage. In some cases, the numbers under consideration were small and therefore the percentage was misleading.

From the content of the letters, it is difficult to ascertain with precision the exact ages of the authors unless they expressly stated this, which very few did. However, as in Davie's earlier analysis of letters sent in response to the 'Seeing Salvation' National Gallery exhibition in 2000, a limited number of assumptions can be made.[12] Although the majority of correspondence was by email where, due to its ubiquity, it remains difficult to judge the age of the writer, 155 letters were handwritten. Many of these used a writing style and structure that is likely to place their authors in the over-60 age bracket. Coupled with this, several mention children and grandchildren, and activities in retirement. Roughly a quarter of the letter writers refer to paid employment (see below), indicating that they were of working age. It is probable, therefore, that the majority of the letters were written by people who span the middle and upper age brackets.

Location

From references made to specific places, we were able to identify that 54 of the letter writers lived locally to Bishop Nicholas (i.e. within the Diocese of Lincoln). A further 54 were written from the North East (Newcastle/ Durham), where Bishop Nicholas had previously worked. One hundred and twenty six letters were sent from other parts of the UK; and 16 were sent from abroad, including Canada, the US, the Republic of Ireland, Kenya, Ghana, Spain and Australia. The location of the remaining authors was unknown.

Religious Affiliation and Position

Two hundred and forty three letter writers were members of the Church of England. Of these, 110 were lay, and 114 were clergy. The remainder were not explicit about their

[12] Grace Davie, 'Seeing Salvation: The Use of Data as Text in the Sociology of Religion'. In Paul Avis ed., Public Faith? The State of Religious Belief and Practice in Britain (London: SPCK, 2003), pp. 28-44

status. Of the clergy, 31 held senior positions (Bishop, Dean, Canon) and 83 were in other posts. In addition, nine authors were retired clergy of varying levels of seniority and one was connected with an Anglican monastic order. Four writers were affiliated with the Church in Wales, and one to the Church in Ireland. Twenty three authors self-identified as Christian, but without giving a denominational affiliation; eight stated they were Christian, but not Anglican; eight stated they were Roman Catholic (including one former Catholic); one was from the Society of Friends (Quakers); and two stated they were 'former Christians'. One letter writer was Jewish.

Sixteen stated that they were atheist, agnostic, humanist, or non-religious. For 100 others, their religious affiliations were unclear. By this we mean that in these letters, there was no mention of religious connection, or use of words such as 'prayers' or 'blessings', although equally there was no mention of an explicitly atheist or humanist affiliation. For the remainder, whilst their religious affiliation was unstated, we deemed them likely to be Christian or to have other monotheistic sympathies due to the language they employed ('prayers', 'blessings', 'God', 'Jesus') and the content of their letters (for example, referencing they were part of a 'church community' but not identifying which one). The significance of religious affiliations will be discussed below, particularly why those without a strong Anglican (or, indeed, religious) affiliation might feel the need to write to Bishop Nicholas on this occasion and what this means for our primary research questions.

Occupation

Of the letter writers, 133 stated that they were clergy (not exclusively Church of England, and including retired clergy) and 15 were employed by the Church of England in a non-ordained capacity: nine were academics and seven were teachers; 12 had public sector jobs, including nurses, police officers, doctors, and community workers, whilst 10 had private

sector work, including engineering and the legal profession. The occupations of the remainder were unknown.

Relationship to Bishop Nicholas

Of the active sample, 158 of the authors were known to the Bishop, as personal friends or as current or former parishioners. Twenty-seven of these could be classed as 'old' friends who were making contact having not been in touch for some time, and 44 were parishioners, friends, or colleagues from the North East. Sixteen stated that they did not know the Bishop and had never met him, or even heard of him before. For the remainder of the sample, their relationship with Bishop Nicholas was unknown, but given their tone and style of writing they were unlikely to be personal friends. The majority of the letter writers, therefore, were connecting with Bishop Nicholas from outside his personal and professional circle. This is significant in that it moves the data beyond the individual and immediate to the realm of the public.

Why were the letters sent?

Overall, 472 of the letters were supportive of Bishop Nicholas and 15 were unsupportive. A further six letters are unclear. With respect to what had prompted their letter, 50 writers stated that they were responding to newspaper articles (in the Sunday Star, The Guardian, or The Telegraph), 33 that they had seen Bishop Nicholas in a TV or online interview, 11 that they had heard his story covered on the radio, three that they were alerted to the issue via social media, and nine by friends.[13]

[13] In addition 75 (15%) cited a more generic 'press and media' and 'recent announcements', and there were further information sources such as an Ad Clerum to the clergy of the Lincoln Diocese.

The reasons for writing were varied. That said, a number of dominant themes emerge which can be broadly divided into 'positive' and 'negative' motivations. In relation to the positive motivations, the phrase: 'to offer support, prayers, and blessings' occurs in some form or other in 302 letters. To cite one example,

> …there are plenty of people fully supportive of you and many more upholding you in their thoughts and prayers (Letter 49)

In 43 letters, more secular sounding equivalents (for example, 'best wishes' and 'happiness') were offered. Eighty-three of the letters articulated admiration for Bishop Nicholas's stance, underlining his courage and bravery. For example:

> I'm not religious at all but I respect your bravery in what you have done and if God's people can't accept you it's their loss (Letter 5)

Thirty-six offered congratulations, and 46 offered thanks, principally for Bishop Nicholas's honest speaking on the issue of homosexuality and the Church. In 19 of the letters, the authors felt compelled to write because they identified personally with Bishop Nicholas as a gay person, and 71 offered additional support and best wishes for Bishop Nicholas's partner. In nine of the letters, Bishop Nicholas was told he was welcome where they lived and worshipped, and not to hesitate if he required a place of refuge.

In relation to the more negative – or questioning – motivations, there was both explicit and implicit criticism of the Church of England's institutional policies relating to gay marriage, to which we return below, but also concerns about the actions of the media in their coverage of Bishop Nicholas. In 90 of the letters, the authors condemned the media for drawing public attention to Bishop Nicholas's situation and others wanted to apologise for their intrusion into his private life. For example:

> The perpetrators of the unfolding events ought to hang their heads in shame (Letter 429)

> It is appalling that you are having to endure this (Letter 29)

In 15 letters only were the authors directly critical of Bishop Nicholas as a person (or for what he represents) to the extent that they asked him to stand down or resign. Each of these authors focused on the belief that homosexuality is not permitted by God, is sinful, against the natural order, and is condemned in the Bible. We must be clear at this juncture that the tone of these negative letters was not, in many instances, civil. Some were written wholly in capital letters (as if to imply shouting); others contained graphic descriptions of the punishments awaiting homosexuals in the afterlife. In short reading these letters was both confronting and unpleasant.

Regarding specifics, a limited selection of biblical verses were repeatedly mentioned or quoted, notably Leviticus 18:22, Ezekiel 33:1-9, and Romans 1:24-27. The authors highlighted that the Bible was the guiding force for their opinion, and their motivation for writing. For example:

> The Bible should be the textbook and guidelines for your work. No more to be said (Letter 414)
>
> You claim to believe in the Bible but you are not living what it teaches (Letter 286)

Bishop Nicholas is accused of misrepresenting the true message of the Gospel and of bringing the Church into disrepute, and was strongly encouraged to seek forgiveness. One letter raised concerns that Bishop Nicholas's public standing and profile would encourage or justify other people to become homosexual; another stated that permissive attitudes towards homosexuality prevalent in contemporary British culture were morally wrong. All that said, we should recall once again that these letters were a tiny minority of the whole corpus, to the surprise of the Diocese and indeed ourselves.

Building on the data outlined here, we turn to our three research questions.

The processes of social change

> I do believe we are starting to see a turning of the tide, which I, and so many people, have longed for, for so many years (Letter 446)

Neither the incident that triggered this body of correspondence, nor the letters themselves, exists in a vacuum. They are both evidence of and a contribution to a continuing process of social change. This is nothing new in itself. It is in the nature of societies to evolve – a process that necessarily unsettles the economic and social groups who stand to lose from what is happening. Churches – indeed religious organizations in general – are not the only ones affected in this respect. They have, however, been particularly discomfited in recent decades as Western societies have adopted new norms in relation to both gender and the understanding of sexualities.[14] The former led to an extensive – and to an extent still unresolved – discussion about the role of women in church leadership; the latter has provoked widespread and at times acrimonious debate about the nature and expression of same-sex relationships and their place in the churches.

The societal shift towards greater acceptance of same-sex relationships has been extraordinarily rapid. One indication among many of the speed of change can be found by comparing the heated debates surrounding 'Section 28' in 1988 with the discussion of the marriage of same-sex couples some 25 years (i.e. one generation) later. 'Section 28' was shorthand for an amendment to the 1988 Local Government Act, which stated explicitly that that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with

[14] See Martine Gross and Andrew Yip, 'Living Spirituality and Sexuality in France and Britain: A Comparison of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Christians in France and Britain,' Social Compass, 57/1 (2011), pp. 40-59 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768609355535).

the intention of promoting homosexuality', or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (our italics).[15] Always controversial, the clause was eventually repealed in 2003. In the intervening years, public opinion on same-sex relationships had begun to alter decisively and continues to do so.[16] In short the middle ground has shifted, a point nicely illustrated by the change in views of a previous Prime Minister. In 2003, David Cameron (newly elected as Leader of the Conservative Party) resisted the repeal of Section 28, a gesture for which he publicly apologized in 2009.[17] Some four years later, Cameron strongly endorsed the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act, which received parliamentary approval in July 2013.

An additional point follows from this, which evokes the subtle and complex relationship between the churches – and more especially an established church – and the society of which it is part. To understand this more fully, we introduce the notion of 'vicarious religion', which can be defined as follows.[18] By vicarious is meant the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but appear to approve of what the minority is doing. The first half of the definition is relatively straightforward and reflects the everyday meaning of the term

[15] Local Government Act 1988, Section 28, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/contents.

[16] British Social Attitudes Survey, A Kind-Hearted but not a Soft-Hearted Country, 34, (2017), http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/, especially the chapter on 'Moral Issues.'

[17] See Nicholas Wyatt, 'David Cameron apologises to gay people for Section 28', The Guardian (2 July 2009), https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/jul/02/david-cameron-gay-pride-apology.

[18] See Grace Davie, Religion in Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and 'Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge.' In Nancy Ammerman, ed., Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 21-36; and 'Vicarious Religion: A Response.' Journal of Contemporary Religion, 25/2 (2010), pp. 261-266.

'vicarious' – that is, to do something on behalf of someone else. The second half is best explored by means of examples.

Religion can operate vicariously in a wide variety of ways. For example, churches and church leaders perform ritual on behalf of others (at the time of a birth or a death for instance); if these services are denied, this may cause offence. Church leaders and churchgoers believe on behalf of others and incur criticism if they do not do this properly. Very often, it is the occasional churchgoer who articulates this disquiet most clearly, and the more senior the church leader, the worse the problem gets. Third, church leaders and churchgoers are expected to embody moral codes on behalf of others, even when those codes have been abandoned by large sections of the populations that they serve.[19] Churches, finally, can offer space for the vicarious debate of unresolved issues in modern societies. If the latter were not the case, it is hard to understand the persistent scrutiny of their positions on a wide variety of topical issues, including changing views on the nature of sexuality. The huge interest in the episode that sparked the letters that form the basis of this article is ample evidence of this assertion. Rather more disturbing for the churches is the fact that their teaching on sexuality no longer conforms to the expectations of large sections of the population, including increasing numbers of churchgoers.

It is instructive to read these letters with the above paragraphs in mind. On the one had they are testament to the changing tide of opinion both in society and in the Church of England. On the other, they reveal the extent to which the Church – or more accurately parts of the Church – is seen as out of step with society as a whole. The resultant mismatch, moreover, is deemed untenable by increasing numbers of people. It is for this reason that 34

[19] The widespread dismay at the churches' failures with respect to child abuse is indicative of hugely damaged trust in this respect.

of the letters articulate an explicit concern that discrimination and ill-treatment of people on the grounds of their sexuality is morally and socially wrong.[20] For some, this is couched in secular terms:

> I personally find it barbaric that we still judge people on the basis of who they choose to share a mutually loving and beneficial relationship (Letter 206)
>
> I look forward to the day that a person's sexuality, be they Bishop, sportsperson or movie star, is no longer a news item. It's as relevant as your hair colour or propensity to sunburn (Letter 204)

For ten others, worries about discrimination are given explicitly Christian language and sentiment, expressing in particular the idea that God in Christ welcomes all, regardless of sexuality:

> I am a firm believer that Jesus, Our Lord, welcomes all those who come to Him regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or whatever. I believe that is the spirit of the Gospel (Letter 14)

For several of the authors, a further factor is apparent: Bishop Nicholas's stance and actions resonate at a personal level. Either the letter writers themselves are gay (including gay clergy) and face discrimination, or they have friends or family members who are LGBTQI+. For both groups Bishop Nicholas offers a beacon of hope in terms of uniting sexual and religious identities. For example:

> You give hope to so many gay and outcast Christians out there (Letter 177)
>
> You are the face of a kinder Christianity where I can embrace myself and my faith without feeling like I am going against God (Letter 69)
>
> Thank you for giving so many thousands of gay people encouragement and hope after so many decades of being trampled into the mud by the Church they love (Letter 96)

[20] Although 34 letters were explicit in their concern about discrimination, a much larger number emphasized inclusivity, kindness and the importance of openness and welcome in churches and in Christian practice as a whole.

Given such sentiments it is unsurprising that in 64 letters there is direct and specific criticism of the Church's policy and practice in relation to same-sex relationships and marriage, and a more general concern that homosexuals have been, and continue to be, ill-treated by the Church as an institution and in particular by GAFCON.[21] A rather smaller number of authors focus specifically on the Church of England's insistence on celibacy for gay bishops, questioning the contemporary relevance of this for effective spiritual and pastoral work, given that heterosexual bishops are not obliged to follow the same regulations.[22] Such criticisms come from within the Church (both lay members and clergy), but also from those with no particular religious affiliation.

Rather more positively, a much larger number of authors call for greater inclusivity both within the Christian churches and in society as a whole. It is important, moreover, that the two are in step. One author writes:

> Diversity is the very definition of the modern world, a world that, if I may be so bold, the church sometimes seems to struggle to connect with. You have made it that tiny bit easier for many of my friends to see that the church is somewhere they may find a home, and that their sexuality does not and should not exclude them from that community (Letter 234)

[21] GAFCON (Global Anglican Futures Conference) is a conservative global movement, originating in 2008 which exists to promote, in its own words, 'the unchanging, transforming Gospel through biblically faithful preaching and teaching,' GAFCON, About GAFCON, https://www.gafcon.org/about. GAFCON take a conservative stance on human sexuality, supporting the primacy of heterosexual marriage.

[22] In his interview with The Guardian (2 September 2016), Bishop Nicholas expressed adherence to Church of England policy on celibacy for gay Bishops, stating 'My observation of human beings over the years has shown me how much variety there is in the way people express their relationships. Physical expression is not for everyone.' See also Rob Clucas, 'Religion, Sexual Orientation and the Equality Act 2010: Gay Bishops in the Church of England Negotiating Rights Against Discrimination', Sociology, 46/5 (2012), pp. 936-950 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038512451533).

A clutch of authors goes further still, arguing forcefully that the mismatch between attitudes in the Church and those in British society as a whole is a key reason for declining support for the Church of England. For example:

> It's about time the Church wakes up to a change in public thoughts regarding same sex couples, maybe then they will receive more support (Letter 335)

The feeling that sexuality is irrelevant to Christian ministry is widespread in the letters, both from those who know Bishop Nicholas personally and those who do not. Even more significant, perhaps, is the number of people who feel that the Bishop will be showered with praise for the stance that he had taken, both from Christians and non-Christians, at home and abroad. In other words, a large majority of letter writers situate themselves on the 'right side of history' as they perceive it, in promoting equality for those who are same-sex attracted. To cite two examples:

> I am neither a Christian nor a homosexual; I am just an average person you may walk past in the street and not notice. As you go about your business please keep in mind most people are warm of heart and have no interest whatsoever in your sexuality. Don't veer from this view because a few people behave cruelly (Letter 98)

> I am neither religious nor gay. I am simply one of the silent majority who recognise a very decent man doing a very decent job when I see one. You have huge support. I hope you can ignore the bigots (Letter 318)

Such sentiments are even more visible in the veritable tsunami of prayer and love offered to the Bishop. This is articulated in a wide variety of ways: for example, the Catholic inclination to remember Bishop Nicholas at the altar; different forms of collective, family and private prayer; the much more tentative 'I'm not very good at praying, but I will do what I can to pray for you' (Letter 200), which merges in turn into secular but none the less heartfelt good wishes:

> There will be huge waves of support and prayer flowing in your direction…and I hope that will be sustaining (Letter 28)
>
> Just to add my voice to the many who will wish to assure you of our prayers and support at this time (Letter 328)
>
> Best wishes for a contented and harassment-free future (Letter 6)

The frequently repeated plea for the Church of England leadership to act decisively in this moment in order to remain in step with more progressive attitudes is the logical consequence of this position. This must happen if the Church is to maintain relevance as an institution in society, and to support existing (and potential) congregants with non-heteronormative sexual identities, healing a rift that has been painful for generations. The sense of pain and hurt that institutional policies and practices have inflicted on same-sex attracted lay and ordained members simply give this call for action greater urgency. A number of the letters are a powerful testament to this, for example:

> As a gay, widowed Priest, I have been angry and disturbed at the lack of integrity and on-going hypocrisy of the Church. I feel within my bones that attitudes will change more than they have already and that progress will be made, but dear God, the cost has been crippling (Letter 60)

Thus the call for an inclusive Church is seen as not only as a benefit to individual members (including the Bishop), but as an unequivocal demonstration of positive leadership that will improve the public perception of the Church and its standing in wider society.

Guardians of the sacred in a changing society

> The Church claims to preach a gospel of love whilst failing to understand what love looks like in people's lives. The boundaries that the Church tries to keep don't make sense anymore (Letter 156).

So why do the churches – and in particular the Church of England – find it so difficult to respond? The answer lies in the inevitable and almost constant dilemmas for institutions which see themselves as guardians of the sacred, when the societies of which they are part are

shifting in nature. On which issues should the religiously-committed follow suit and on which should they resist? The answers are far from clear. On the one hand we (or to be more precise, some of us) commend the churches for their ethical stand in resisting the economic excesses of Western societies or in defending the rights of minorities; on the other we castigate them for lagging behind on issues relating to moral change.

Interestingly the letters themselves speak to these tensions, both explicitly and implicitly. As we have seen, the vast majority of writers are supportive of the Bishop and call for kindness, inclusivity and changes of institutional position. There is, however, a corresponding awareness that it may not be quite that simple. Resistance – it seems – is almost inevitable, expressed amongst other things in a fear that the Bishop is likely to be overwhelmed by negative comment. Indeed, an important motive for writing amongst 22 authors was to counter this anticipated criticism, for example:

> You no doubt face a barrage of grimness from all over the world (Letter 42)
>
> I'm sure that the thought of looking in your inbox is rather horrid at the moment as you must have many critical comments coming in (Letter 99)

And whilst it is tempting to discount the letters that contain strident criticisms of same-sex relationships in general, and Bishop Nicholas in particular, due to their small numbers, they remain important evidence of the divisions within the Church of England, not to mention the wider society on this issue. We cannot simply brush them aside. Aggregating these various categories, it is clear that a substantial section of our sample (well over a hundred letters) speak as much to the non-resolution of these difficult issues, and the sometimes damaging impact that they have on individuals, as they do to the encouragement found in Bishop Nicholas' stance.

A second – and rather more probing – question follows from this. All of us – the Lincoln team, ourselves, and significant numbers of letter writers – expected a differently weighted body of correspondence. Specifically we were aware that, for whatever, reason, an identifiable constituency is not represented. We have in mind the members of churches who style themselves as 'bible-believing' – a category that transcends denominational boundaries.[23] A detailed analysis of this constituency goes well beyond the limits of this article. The crucial point to note, however, is that these churches are – in relative terms – successful on many of the conventional indicators (such as finance or congregational numbers), and that one reason for such 'success' is their adherence to bible-based teaching. In other words, they are attractive precisely because they resist the changing mores of late modern societies.[24]

That said, these churches contain within themselves a broad spectrum of opinion, which varies from the deeply conservative and seemingly unforgiving views that were expressed in a handful of the letters at one end, through the pastorally welcoming but nonetheless uncompromising positions on same-sex partnerships in the middle, to the still occasional voices exploring new ways of understanding the biblical text at the other.[25] It is

[23] Following Nancy Ammerman, bible-believing churches are those which differentiate their teachings from churches which are seen as placing non-biblical or extra-biblical teaching as higher or equal in authority to the Bible. See Nancy Ammerman, Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World, (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press.

[24] Grace Davie, Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 140-3.

[25] What might be termed the midway position is nicely illustrated by the Evangelical Alliance, Resources for Church Leaders – Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality, at: www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/resources-for-church-leaders-biblical-and-pastoral-responses-to-homosexuality.cfm. (2012). Examples of the 'new voices' can be found in Steve Chalke, 'The Bible and Homosexuality: Part One' Christianity, https://www.premierchristianity.com/Featured-Topics/Homosexuality/The-Bible-and-Homosexuality-Part-One (February 2013); and Vicky Beeching, Undivided: Coming Out, Becoming Whole, and Living Free From Shame (New York: HarperCollins, 2018). Equally

the two latter categories that are absent from our sample with one brave exception: that is the writer (Letter 229) who states that she is from a 'conservative evangelical background' – thus consciously articulating the theological differences that exist between herself and Bishop Nicholas – whilst praising him for his graciousness in the media interviews and assuring him of her prayers at this 'turbulent time'. This absence needs careful interpretation. It does not imply that these people are not engaged in debate about issues of this nature – they most certainly are and in a wide variety of settings; it is simply that they did not express their views in this particular correspondence.

An additional observation concludes this section: that is to note that the letters, taken as a whole, transcend the topic of same-sex relationships. The notion of vicarious religion outlined above is helpful in this respect – indeed it resonates in two rather different ways. On the one hand, Bishop Nicholas emerges as a role-model for a wide range of individuals both inside and outside the churches; on the other he is widely commended for his pastoral ministry. Taken together these sentiments demonstrate an investment and ownership of the established Church and its institutional behaviour which evokes a form of 'participation' that goes beyond – well beyond – conventional belief and regular attendance.

To expand: just under half of the letter writers tell us that they are not explicitly religious; nor are they connected to a religious community, Anglican or otherwise. Yet each writer felt it necessary to contact Bishop Nicholas, which meant searching for an address (e-mail or postal) and constructing a letter. For some, this is likely to have been a routine task.

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interesting are the reactions to these found on the Evangelical Alliance website, for example Steve Clifford, The Bible & Homosexuality: A Response to Steve Chalke, http://www.eauk.org/church/stories/the-bible-and-homosexuality.cfm (January 2013); and Peter Lynas, *Undivided: Thoughts on Vicky Beeching's new book*, https://www.eauk.org/culture/reviews/undivided-thoughts-on-vicky-beechings-new-book.cfm (July 2018).

For others, this was clearly not the case – for example, the individual who had 'never written to a Bishop before – it's quite exciting' but felt compelled to do so in the wake of the media attention given to this issue (Letter 183). It is these letters that express a desire for the Church of England to affirm the presence of Bishop Nicholas (and, by implication, the many other people who are lesbian, gay and bisexual). In other words, they remain invested in him as a role model (even if they might not turn to him for spiritual guidance), and they call on the Church to 'do religion' in a particular way – inclusive, supportive, and kind.

Equally striking, and frequently very touching, is the regard in which Bishop Nicholas is held – on the one hand by those who are personally connected to him as friends and parishioners, but on the other by those who witnessed the way in which he presented himself to the wider public in September 2016. In no less than 104 letters, the authors highlight that their motivation for writing was in response to Bishop Nicholas as a person. For example:

> You're a good man, Nick, and a wonderful ambassador for contemporary faith and worship (Letter 127)

And in 81 of these cases, the authors underline not only that they thought Bishop Nicholas had presented himself eloquently in the media interviews, but that this was even more impressive given the circumstances:

> You will have done the Church a great service by acting with such integrity, dignity and graciousness (Letter 459)
>
> You appear to me to be just the sort of person the church needs (although I confess I speak as a non-believer) (Letter 209)

Finally an analysis of repeated words in the body of the letters as a whole simply reinforces the point. Bishop Nicholas is described as: decent, brave, strong, dignified, warm, sincere, natural, honest, truthful, wise, prayerful, understanding, thoughtful, and admirable.

He is seen to exemplify courage, wisdom, gravitas, tolerance, gentleness, humanity, and firm convictions. The constant repetition of these qualities underscores the high esteem in which Bishop Nicholas is held, both within the Church and outside. In short, he is seen to exemplify what it means to be a priest and a bishop in a modern society. In addition, Bishop Nicholas has clearly touched the lives of many people and their families in his ministry and they in turn wish to support him through a difficult time. For example:

> You were an amazing parish priest and I'm sure you're just as amazing as Bishop so don't let anyone tell you otherwise! (Letter 393)
>
> Thank you for your prayers …during the black days (Letter 362)
>
> We remain eternally grateful for your kindness and support (Letter 363)
>
> I'm sure you know this already, but your presence in the diocese is an enormous gift to us. We are immensely blessed by your compassion and grace-filled ministry (Letter 243)

Thus Bishop Nicolas himself emerges as a guardian of the sacred and a welcome one at that. It is abundantly clear, moreover, that individuals do matter, and that widening circles of ministry can be extraordinarily effective in 21st century Britain – the more so if that ministry is inclusive, caring, and sensitive. Indeed, an encounter with an individual can, it seems, alter your perception of an institution, even if that encounter is mediated through the newspaper, television, radio, or online.

Making decisions

> I also hope and pray that the day won't be far off when 'news' such as yours will not be news at all (Letter 17)

The third question to be raised in this article references process as much as content, and is less directly related to the letters themselves. That said in terms of both content and

style the letters undoubtedly reflect the context from which they emerge: that is a Northern European country, with an established church coloured by a particular understanding of the Reformation and – in consequence – a distinctive identity or way of doing business. As we have seen, the continuing links between this Church and the society of which it is part are more present in the letters than might have been expected. The Reformed dimension is equally evident – if not explicitly stated – in the assumptions that priests and bishops in the Church of England will marry. Put differently, a 'Catholic' discussion about same-sex relationships – if we may call it such – would raise a very different set of issues concerning clergy appointments.

Conversely, two points are noticeable by their absence: first that there is almost nothing in the letters about the decision-making process within the Church of England; and second that there is no recognition of the constraints imposed on that Church by its place in the Anglican Communion. The crucial point can be put as a question: who will make the decisions that are invited in these letters and on what authority? Davie covers these issues more fully and concludes that the Church of England has already shifted its ground and is likely to shift further.[26] For example, any kind of discrimination regarding homosexual inclinations is now formally condemned and in a remarkably short space of time civil partnerships have become the answer rather than the problem. And in a typically Anglican way, lay people are allowed more latitude than the clergy. The process, however, has been tortuous as the baton is passed back and forth between the Synod (or more accurately synods) and the bishops. Is this, in other words, a top-down or a bottom-up decision? The in many

[26] Grace Davie, Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 128-9.

ways admirable checks and balances built into Church of England governance can all too easily lead to immobilism, on this issue as they have on many others.[27]

It is widely recognized that the most difficult questions relate to the implications of these decisions for the Anglican Communion as it is presently constituted.[28] This is hardly surprising given that a huge majority of Anglicans now live in the global south and that a substantial number of these people remain conservative in in their attitudes to same-sex activity. But not entirely: exceptions exist and attitudes are changing.[29] And given the speed of change in most parts of the 'developed' world – evidenced in these letters – we remain optimistic: it is not impossible that that there will be similar movement elsewhere.

A short post-script brings this discussion to an end. We have already stressed that the process of social change is continuous: the debate about same-sex relationships is but one of many examples spanning centuries rather than decades. Over the long term there have been similar and very painful 'battles' over handedness, slavery, race and ethnicity, gender and the rights of children. Did we really think, for example, that left-handed people were sinister? And why, at different times in our history, were certain categories of people excluded from civil rights, voting, the professions, leadership or whatever? And why, finally, did it take so

[27] The protracted decision to accept the ordination of women is a case in point. See Grace Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), especially Chapter 9, which sets the debate in a wider discussion of authority structures in the Church of England. See also the references in note 6.

[28] The already large literature on the strains and tensions on the Anglican Communion brought about by changing attitudes to same sex relationships continues to grow. It cannot be engaged in a short article. A recent and admirably clear introduction to the issues at stake can be found in Christopher Craig Brittain and Andrew McKinnon, The Anglican Communion at a Crossroads: The Crises of a Global Church (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018).

[29] Christopher Craig Brittain and Andrew McKinnon, The Anglican Communion at a Crossroads: The Crises of a Global Church (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018).

long for society to accept the evidence of a child – the turning point in lifting the lid on child abuse? All of these issues speak to the same underlying question: what does it mean to be human? The debate described in this article is no different, nor will it be the last. Already the question of what does it mean to be human is posed with respect to new, if related, topics: notably increasing fluidity in gender roles, advancements in fertilization and corresponding changes in family life. More radical – and still more distant – will be the debates surrounding the rights of non-human animals on the one hand and artificial intelligence on the other. In short the primary question remains the same, but its applications will vary. It is naïve to suppose that once the same-sex debate is 'settled' there will be no such problems to perplex us. To assume so is not only to get the current debate out of proportion, but to misunderstand the nature of human living.

In conclusion

This article is based on a small but significant body of evidence regarding a controversial issue in the religious life of this country. In presenting this material, we started by outlining our sources (an unexpected cache of correspondence) and the findings that emerged from this. Subsequent sections placed this material into a broader context: what do the letters tell us about the place of religion in modern Britain? The argument was developed in relation to on-going social change, the reactions of the churches to this process, and the difficulties that are likely to arise as definitive decisions are called for. The notion of 'vicarious religion' was deployed to understand better the continuing connections between the established Church (the key institution in this discussion) and the society of which it is part.

It is clear that the letters do not – indeed cannot – provide an 'answer' in themselves; they constitute none the less a rich and unexpected source of data on changing attitudes in

both church and society. Most remarkable, however, is their tone. There are exceptions, but wherever possible they emphasise the good and the gracious and respond positively towards this. It is for this reason that they merit particular attention in an all too often intemperate debate.