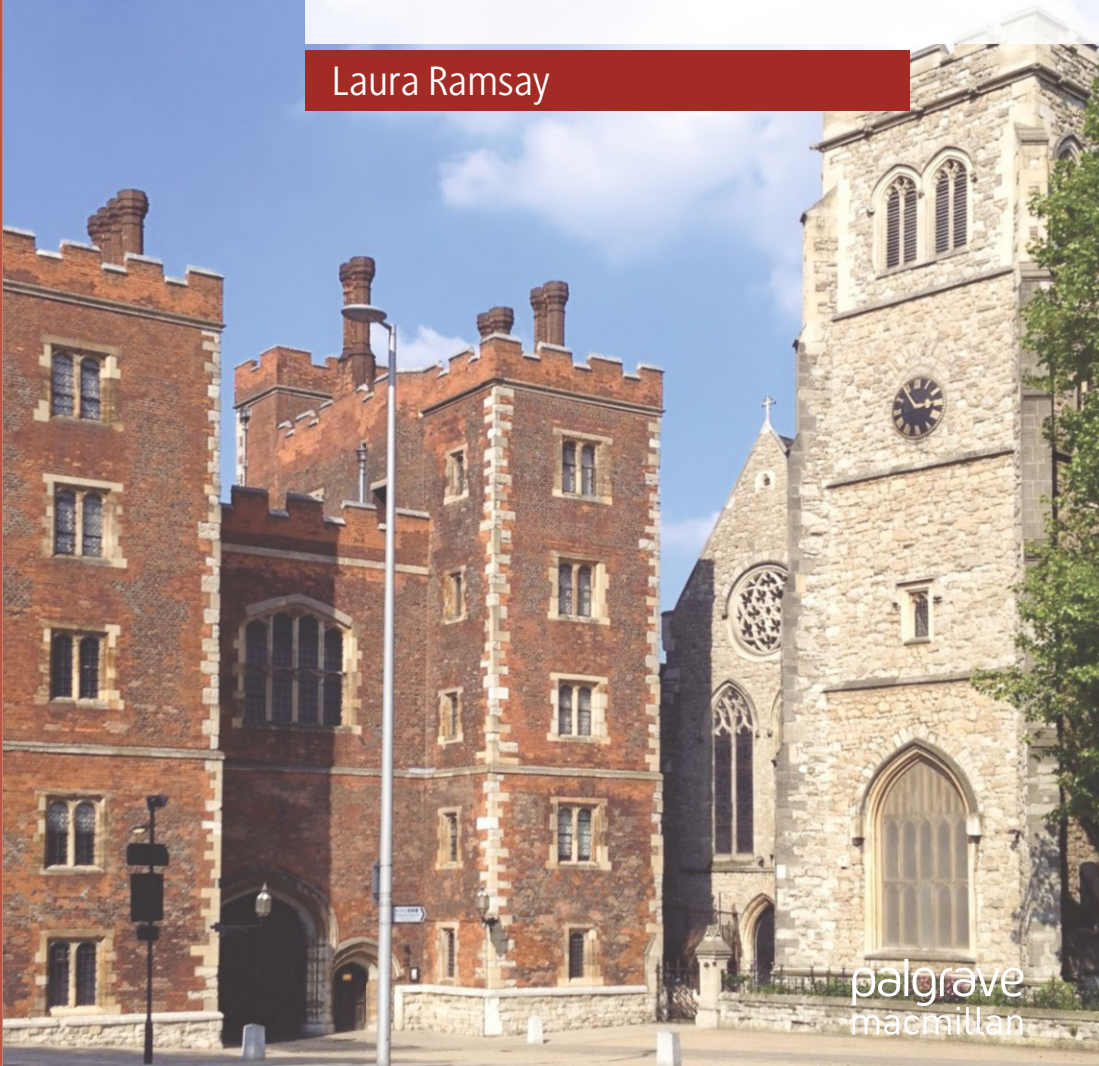




GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES IN HISTORY

Sexuality and the Church of England, 1918–1980

Laura Ramsay



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*This book is dedicated to the memory
of Monica Mary Titterton (1928–2016).
Nanna—you'll be pleased,
I can finally answer yes, I've 'done all my words'*

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Laura Ramsay's *Sexuality and the Church of England, 1918-1980* analyses the complex processes of negotiation, argumentation, and policymaking within the Anglican Church on issues of sexuality, including contraception, homosexuality, and sexual morality more broadly. By tracing debates over a long chronology, Ramsay is able to draw robust conclusions about how the Church reached a deadlock in its position on LGBTQ+ people. Through an analysis of an exceptionally large range of archival documents, Ramsay explores competing approaches towards sexuality within the Church of England. Her nuanced study contributes to our knowledge of the past in relation to questions about gender, sexuality, power, and both religious belief and institutions.

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I'm most grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Institute of Historical Research, and the Department of History and Graduate School at the University of Nottingham for grants that funded various archival visits. Archivists and staff at the Church of England Record Centre, Lambeth Palace Library, and the British Library made that archival research possible and enjoyable, and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland provided kind permission to use their archival materials. I'm also thankful to the Merrill family—Deb, Steve, Julia, and Jonathan—for keeping me company on my trips to London and for their generous hospitality over the years.

Some of the chapters that follow are based on work that has appeared elsewhere, and I am grateful for the permission granted to rework and republish here. Chapter 3 draws on work published as “Assembling an Anglican View of Self-Governing Sexual Citizenship, 1918–1945,” in *The Church of England and British Politics Since 1900*, eds. Thomas Rodger, Philip Williamson, and Matthew Grimley (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020). Chapters 7 and 9 draw on work published as “The Church of England, Homosexual Law Reform, and the Shaping of the Permissive Society, 1957–1979,” *Journal of British Studies*, 57, no. 1 (2018): 108–37.

Special thanks are due to my friends and colleagues in the Department of Humanities and Law at Bournemouth University, as well as my former colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Nottingham. Both places have provided a supportive and intellectually stimulating environment in which to complete this project, and I am especially grateful to all my colleagues who have generously listened to my endless talk about my work and who have offered many words of wisdom along the way.

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What follows is written purely from the perspective of a historian who has long been fascinated by issues of sexuality, gender, and religion in modern Britain. If, at times, it appears I am overly sympathetic towards the individuals or organisations I discuss, then it is only because I have spent so long studying their ideas, actions, and intentions, and seeking to understand them within a historical context that is very different to our own. This book is written for all who are curious to find out more about how the contemporary church reached its present difficulties over issues of sexuality, but especially for anyone who has ever felt hurt, puzzled, or disappointed by religious institutions’ attitudes towards sex, identity, and relationships.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABWON	Action for Biblical Witness to Our Nation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCC	British Council of Churches
BSR	Board for Social Responsibility
CEMWC	Church of England Moral Welfare Council
CEPS	Church of England Purity Society
CERC	Church of England Record Centre
CHE	Campaign for Homosexual Equality
C.O.P.E.C.	Christian Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship
C.O.S.M.A.F.	Christian Conference on Sex, Marriage and the Family
FPA	Family Planning Association
GAFCON	Global Anglican Future Conference
GCM	Gay Christian Movement
GLF	Gay Liberation Front
GSFA	Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches
HLRS	Homosexual Law Reform Society
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
MWWA	Moral Welfare Workers' Association
NFOL	Nationwide Festival of Light
NVALA	National Viewers' and Listeners' Association
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
PMC	Public Morality Council
TNA	The National Archives
WCA	White Cross Army
WCL	White Cross League
WCS	White Cross Society



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

On 27 February 1981, the General Synod (the national assembly and legislative body of the Church of England) met to discuss a controversial report, *Homosexual Relationships: A Contribution to Discussion*. This document was prepared by a working party appointed by the General Synod's Board for Social Responsibility (BSR), an advisory body responsible for promoting and coordinating the church's thought and action in matters concerning family, social, and industrial life, and was informally named the Gloucester report after its chair, John Yates, the Bishop of Gloucester (1975–91). To the outrage of critics, the Gloucester report tentatively, but unanimously, concluded:

we do not think it possible to deny that there are circumstances in which individuals may justifiably choose to enter into a homosexual relationship with the hope of enjoying a companionship and physical expression of sexual love similar to that which is to be found in marriage.¹

Despite its efforts to provide careful reconsideration of a topic “bound to provoke strong feelings,” the Gloucester report was mired in difficulties from the outset. The working party's earliest draft, which took four years to complete, was first considered by members of the BSR in 1978. At this point, the BSR shared its criticisms and asked the working party to

continue its deliberations. While the working party accepted some of the Board's criticisms and amended its report accordingly, it did not accept all of their comments.² When the working party's final, revised report was discussed at a meeting of the BSR in October 1978, the Board considered the subject so controversial that it gave members additional time to reflect and decide whether or not to publish. It was therefore not until May 1979 that the BSR finally agreed to publish the Gloucester report, but with the important proviso that the document would include a foreword by Graham Leonard, the Bishop of Truro (1973–81) and chair of the BSR (1976–83), which made clear to readers that “publication in no way commits the Church of England or the Board” to its contents, alongside an additional statement of the Board's own “critical observations.” The BSR emphasised that it was “deeply divided” by the Gloucester report's conclusions—some members entirely dissented, while others supported the working party's general approach and viewpoint but dissociated themselves from some of the arguments. The BSR's criticisms particularly focused on the report's biblical and theological sections, which members felt had neither confirmed biblical condemnation of homosexual behaviour as final (as some members believed should be the case) nor refuted this material in a way that fully supported changes in church teaching about homosexual relationships.³

Following publication and discussion about the report in the press, the stage was set for a showdown. Within half an hour on the first day of the General Synod meeting in November 1979, Graham Leonard faced a “barrage of criticisms and sharp questions.” Despite the best efforts of those Synod members who agitated to discuss the Gloucester report sooner, the BSR staved off this demand by arguing that it was “far better to have a period in which local discussions can be encouraged before the debate comes to this House.”⁴ However, the issue could not be postponed indefinitely. By the time it reached the Synod in February 1981, tensions had climaxed. John Yates lamented in his address to the Synod that his working party had been able to approach their deliberations with a freedom that had since become more difficult in the fraught, tense, and hostile atmosphere that had emerged since the report's publication. Vocal individuals and groups established themselves on different sides of the debate and introduced various amendments and motions to try to force the Synod to make a judgement about the Gloucester report—either to commend it for wider discussion in the church or to dissociate the Synod from its conclusions. By extension, these amendments and motions sought

to commit the Synod to a new pronouncement on the acceptability of the physical expression of sexual love in homosexual relationships. But the bishops and archbishops had seen this coming and manoeuvred proceedings to ensure that the Synod would neither endorse nor condemn the viewpoints contained within the Gloucester report. Graham Leonard expressed his hope that no member would seek victory in the debate and pointed towards “deep differences of opinion” which, he urged, “cannot be resolved in a single debate, even after time for discussion in the Church.” Simon Phipps (Bishop of Lincoln, 1974–86) pleaded for the Synod not to use the Gloucester report as “an occasion to pronounce,” but to keep the issue open for discussion. Robert Runcie (Archbishop of Canterbury, 1980–91) steered the Synod in a similar direction. While noting that the Gloucester report had not been welcomed by those in the church who wanted a clear blast of the trumpet, Runcie hoped that it would now be used for informed discussion to combat silly innuendos and mockery in church circles. In the end, the Synod sidestepped all attempts to force its hand. There was to be no new pronouncement on homosexual relationships. Rather, by a considerable majority, the Synod passed a neutral motion simply “taking note” of the Gloucester report and leaving the matter open for further contemplation and discussion.⁵

This outcome was a victory for those who wanted to avoid the Synod alienating any of the emerging Anglican factions by committing itself to a particular stance on a polarising issue, but it was viewed as bitterly disappointing by those on all sides of the debate. More significantly, this episode in the General Synod in 1981 indicated a turning point for the Church of England. Until then, the church had played an active role in shaping national discussions about issues of sexuality and morality. Throughout the twentieth century, the church had anticipated, popularised, and helped to implement new notions of responsible sexual citizenship and new ways of understanding sex and desire. But, in the years after 1981, the church was increasingly left behind, and its views came to be regarded by some as, at best, backward-looking and intransigent, and at worst, sexist and homophobic. In 1981, John Yates had optimistically predicted that “when the dust has settled,” the Gloucester report would be judged as “pretty well on course for its time, as an Anglican document.” He further noted that “Consensus within the Church and in society matters enormously—but we have a long way to go before we find it. It seems to take the Church at least a generation to find it—and with this particular issue it may take even longer.”⁶ Yet the discussions that Yates and others

had hoped to stimulate showed few signs of progress in the decades that followed. In December 1991, a further statement by the General Synod's House of Bishops described the Gloucester report as a "landmark" text that made a "major contribution" to church discussion, but observed that "because of the controversy it aroused it perhaps failed to promote as much serious debate as might have been hoped for."⁷ Instead, the church quickly reached an impasse in its discussions about same-sex relationships, which it repeatedly struggled and failed to resolve via subsequent reports and recommendations.⁸

Several decades later, Anglican discussions remain ongoing and the church is still working through many of the same, central disagreements about sexuality, identity, relationships, and the meaning and authority of scripture and tradition that were prompted by the Gloucester report. In 2022, the Lambeth Conference which brought together over 600 bishops from around 165 countries of the global Anglican Communion, affirmed that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, are "full members of the Body of Christ," and are to be "welcomed, cared for, and treated with respect." Yet, despite their continued commitment to "listening and walking together," the bishops acknowledged their "deep disagreement" over same-sex relationships.⁹ Broadly speaking, since the 1990s, approaches towards homosexuality have become a symbolic focus of conflict between a majority of growing churches in the global south that consider conservative stances to be a marker of orthodox Christian belief, and a minority of churches in the global north that have developed new approaches towards same-sex relationships.¹⁰ Since this has threatened splits within the Anglican Communion, the 2022 Conference sought a pragmatic compromise. It reiterated sentiments of inclusivity endorsed by Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, but did not repeat its claims that "homosexual practice" was "incompatible with Scripture," nor its rejection of "the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions" or ordination of people in same-sex unions.¹¹

The Church of England's "Living in Love and Faith" project has also sought reconciliation by coordinating shared conversations, listening exercises, and information gathering at grassroots level between 2017 and 2023. This culminated in the bishops publicly apologising for the ways in which the church has rejected, excluded, or treated LGBTQI+ people with hostility and homophobia, and commending a new series of draft resources for worship that might be used to "affirm and celebrate same-sex couples in church."¹² In February 2023, after a fierce debate lasting

over eight hours, which witnessed the defeat of many amendments attempting to derail the bishops' proposals, the General Synod passed a motion that lamented and repented "the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people" and the harm this caused, looked forward to new episcopal guidance on prayers for same-sex couples, and aspired to "journey together while acknowledging the different deeply held convictions within the Church."¹³ Yet, despite marking a historic moment in a long-standing Anglican conflict, these tentative efforts to make progress have been widely described as going too far for some, and not nearly far enough for others. The church still has a long and difficult journey towards achieving its goal of "moving forward" in a way that does not exclude anyone's views.¹⁴ In her address to the Synod in February 2023, Sarah Mullally (the Bishop of London and chair of the "Next Steps" committee on Living in Love and Faith) acknowledged that "Real and profound disagreement continues to characterise the Church of England." But, more than this, she argued, "these particular disagreements mar our life together, tarnish our reputation in the world we are called to serve, and distract from God's mission."¹⁵ This book tells the story of how the church reached this deadlock in its views on sexuality and points towards some of the reasons why these historic disagreements have proved so difficult for successive generations of Anglican thinkers to resolve.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF RELIGIOUS DECLINE AND SEXUAL MODERNITY

Questions about the role of religion and the Christian churches in modern Britain have long fascinated historians, sociologists, and social commentators, but there are still intense disagreements about what part Christian beliefs and institutions might have played in the social and cultural changes of the last century. For a long time, theories of secularisation dominated the scholarship, suggesting that processes of modernisation since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—including industrialisation, urbanisation, and other associated developments—caused insurmountable obstacles for religion, leading to the decline of Christianity and the influence of the churches in Britain and elsewhere in the Western world.¹⁶ Since the 1980s, revisionist scholarship on the history of British religion has refuted central aspects of the secularisation thesis by problematising the timing of such accounts, the role of the churches in this process, and the indicators by which religious decline should be measured.¹⁷ Yet

secularisation narratives continue to hold a powerful sway over our understandings of religion in modern Britain.¹⁸ From a historical perspective, few scholars have felt there is a story worth telling about the Christian churches and issues of sex and morality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and those studies that initially emerged within the history of religion tended to focus quite narrowly on Christian attitudes without fully considering the ways in which religious views contributed to wider public discussions, new understandings of sex and desire, and new policy developments in Britain.¹⁹

Assumptions about the limited role of religion in modern society have also been reinforced by scholarship on the history of sexuality, where early work developed alongside the social movements and activism of the 1970s and tended to portray Christian individuals and institutions as antagonistic towards change.²⁰ Later scholarship then tended to ignore the impact of religion, usually in favour of prioritising secular influences on ideas about sexuality that emerged within medicine, science, and the law.²¹ It has thus been difficult for the history of sexuality to shake off deeply embedded assumptions within accounts of British modernisation which connect the rise of new legal approaches and scientific and medical understandings of sexuality to arguments about the decreasing authority, popularity, and credibility of the Christian churches. According to such ideas, Christian approaches towards sex and sexuality remained hegemonic until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but as the power of the churches declined, secular influences increasingly dominated.²²

Long-held assumptions about sexuality and modernity are also reinforced by some historians of religion, who suggest that the churches and Christian commentators lagged behind the ideas of progressive, non-religious liberals such as Humanists and atheists. Such accounts characterise Britain's post-war development as moving away from an uncivilised, morally oppressive, and prurient, dominant Christian culture, towards a new, civilised, progressive, diverse, and tolerant, secular culture which rapidly emerged from the 1960s onwards. Christian individuals and institutions are represented as either stubbornly refusing to modify their traditional ideas in response to shifts in society's attitudes, or else largely failing to play catch up with a cultural revolution in beliefs and behaviour relating to sex and morality.²³ Yet simplistic interpretations only serve to confirm easy assumptions in the popular imagination which, largely spurred on by media coverage of recent controversies involving the churches and issues of sexuality and same-sex marriage, appear to suggest

that religion is a rigid, repressive, and essentially anti-modern mode of understanding and that the role of the British churches has always been limited to that of conservative moral critic.²⁴ Although issues of sexuality have certainly presented the churches with many challenges and unresolved disputes in recent times, there is a much more complex history to uncover.

In recent decades, a fresh body of scholarship has challenged existing historical narratives of religious decline and sexual modernity and sought to bridge the gap between the competing interests of histories of sexuality and histories of religion. These accounts have shown that Christian commentators—including mainstream religious bodies—embraced self-consciously modern and morally neutral approaches towards sexuality that developed alongside the rise of new, scientific, and medical understandings. Thus, from the early twentieth century, a dialogic and symbiotic relationship between “Christian” and “secular” thought emerged.²⁵ In addition, various scholars have shown that church commentators played a key role in the genesis of permissive legal reforms, such as the Sexual Offences Act 1967 which decriminalised private homosexual acts between two men over the age of 21 in England and Wales. These accounts emphasise that, through its support for decriminalisation and for new ways of approaching homosexual citizenship, the church contributed to the broader secularisation of sexual and moral questions in Britain.²⁶ Overall, this scholarship has established that Christian commentators—and even sometimes institutions—helped to lead and drive developments in British sexual culture, rather than simply dragging their feet and failing to keep pace with society.

Nevertheless, revisionist accounts have struggled to make headway towards breaking the grip of long-held assumptions about Christianity and sexuality in mainstream historical narratives, not least due to criticisms raised by respected scholars in the field. Callum Brown has scathingly commented that this revisionist literature is “one-sided” because it focuses too much on the progressive tendencies of supposedly “radical” Christians, especially in the Church of England, and therefore deflects from the reality that neither the churches nor British society as a whole were ever dominated by a liberal or radical Christian culture.²⁷ There is certainly a danger that by focusing only on particular individuals and groups within the churches, or concentrating on specific episodes (especially in the 1950s and 1960s), our historical assessments become distorted. However, Brown’s analysis of the post-war “battle for Christian Britain” creates the

opposite illusion that the churches and society were dominated by a conservative Christian culture that only began to lose its grip on the establishment from the 1960s onwards. Surely both approaches perpetuate an oversimplified version of a multifaceted historical reality.

Recognising the limitations of existing scholarship, this book explores the full complexities of institutional decision-making on issues of sexuality, as well as the implications of disputes for the broader unfolding of discussions, debates, and policymaking, both within the church and outside of it. Moreover, unlike other accounts, these complicated developments are traced over a long chronology between 1918 and 1980, which bridges the divide between early twentieth-century attitudes and later approaches that developed in the post-war period. This chronology takes us from the interwar years, when the Church of England acted as a powerful social, cultural, and political force for shaping thought and action on issues of sex and morality, through the challenges of the post-war years and beyond, when the church's established ways of functioning as an agent of mediation and compromise ultimately became a bar to it maintaining pace with new approaches towards issues of sexuality, identity, and relationships.

REFRAMING CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF MODERN SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP

While it is important to address significant episodes in the church's engagement with issues of sex and sexuality, such as the interwar Lambeth Conference debates on contraception and the bishops' support for homosexual law reform in the 1960s, it is essential to contextualise these moments within a longer and more complex process of historical development. Rather than assuming that church commentators approached such issues as isolated encounters, we must locate these instances as part of broader developments within Anglican thought and action on a variety of matters relating to sex and relationships. In the twentieth century, this activity was known as moral welfare work and involved social casework as well as educational initiatives. By examining the evolution of Anglican moral welfare efforts, it is possible to trace the interconnected activities of a wide network of church organisers across the century. Moral welfare workers carved out a place for themselves and their viewpoints at the heart of church decision-making bodies that became "the official agent of the Church in the field of sexual relationships."²⁸ Furthermore, they exercised

a tangible influence on society particularly in the years before the expansion of state welfare, when a broad network of external, voluntary, and professional organisations looked to the established church in its role of “offering leadership which gives inspiration and practical assistance” to those active in this field of social work.²⁹

Between 1918 and 1980, the church’s moral welfare organisations were frequently at the forefront of sexual and social change in Britain, with shifts in their ideas and undertakings representing proactive moves to influence the attitudes of church, state, and society in ways we might find surprising. Beginning in the interwar years, the Archbishops’ Advisory Board for Preventive and Rescue Work developed an aspiration for church pronouncements to provide “a positive conception of the part that sex plays or should play in the life of society and of the individual.”³⁰ This triggered an enduring trend in moral welfare efforts to supply positive, constructive, and rationally based statements about sex that demonstrated a rejuvenated Christian approach towards sexual morality and the demands of responsible citizenship. From the mid-1920s onwards, the church’s moral welfare organisations increasingly shifted away from older, prohibitive moral frameworks, towards Christian approaches based on notions of self-government, training for citizenship, and individual social adjustment. In such ways, church commentators contributed to the view that sexual behaviour belonged in the private sphere, as principally of concern to the individual. Supporters of this approach believed that responsible citizenship could not be encouraged via “purely authoritarian statements” about sex, rather an effective and enduring Christian morality could only be fostered by issuing positive training in the duties and responsibilities of sex, marriage, and the family. Young people needed clear and frank instruction, provided in an atmosphere “free from all fear and embarrassment,” that showed how “the Christian code of sex ethics has a rational basis” founded on religious, social, medical, and scientific reasoning.³¹ From this perspective, the church’s duty was to train young people in the art of “moral responsibility” so that when they made personal sexual decisions according to conscience, they would make choices consistent with Christian principles—they would use God’s gift of sex in the highest possible way by ensuring that individual actions were never harmful to others or to the broader welfare of society.³²

Church commentators thus engaged with, and contributed to, debates about new forms of autonomous sexual selfhood that unfolded in the twentieth century. Their contributions to contemporary discussions about

the needs and obligations of sexual citizenship need to be recognised and further interrogated, especially in relation to the ways in which they helped to prepare the ground for later changes in attitudes and approaches towards sexuality and morality in subsequent decades. Within histories of sexuality, Michel Foucault's influential studies on governmentality and the formation of new understandings of sexual desire in modern Western societies have left an enduring legacy. Foucault posited that sexuality is a distinctively modern deployment of power through which the lives and the sexual and reproductive capacities of human subjects are constituted, regulated, and governed. Sexual and moral norms, he argued, are established through strategies of "knowledge-power," and subsequently internalised and replicated by individual subjects. Such administrative techniques rest on the fundamental assumption that modern sexual subjects are ethically free, within certain limits, and thereby encouraged to govern their own lives and conduct.³³ Yet, despite Foucault's observations that emerging ideas about sexuality in the West were deeply connected to the history of Christian ideas and practice—especially in lending religious, "confessional" modes to the expression of sexual identity—Christian influences have often been viewed as either standing outside of developments towards new forms of sexual governance and agency, or antagonistic towards modern notions of enhanced individual autonomy, freedom of choice, increased liberalism, and tolerance.³⁴ While histories of sexuality have tended to prioritise secular contributions to modern techniques of regulation and expanding notions of individual freedom and self-governance, some histories of religion suggest the British churches largely dragged their feet on issues of sexual morality and continued to expound mostly conservative doctrines about "right" and "wrong" behaviour.³⁵

To the contrary, notions of self-governance were an integral part of Anglican efforts to modernise Christian views on sex from the mid-1920s onwards. The term "modernise" is not anachronistic here, rather it conveys the genuine essence of this position which originated within the church's moral welfare organisations and consciously aimed to update and rethink Christian sex teaching to ensure it was fit for purpose in a modernising society. Revisionist accounts have already established the existence of a "deeply symbiotic" relationship between Christian, scientific, and medical understandings of sex and desire during the first part of the twentieth century.³⁶ But, more than this, the merging of "religious" and "secular" knowledge, and the mutual support that these different models of understanding sex, desire, identity, and morality offered to each other,

helps us to gain further insight into the mechanisms by which an eclectic and sometimes contradictory mix of new approaches towards sexuality emerged in Britain. Mathew Thomson and Dean Rapp have already made compelling arguments as to how psychology more broadly was popularised through processes of accommodation with other trends in thought and culture, and adaptation to still powerful existing languages of self, such as those centred on character and religion.³⁷ Religious uptake of new concepts drawn from psychoanalysis and the new, scientific study of sex known as “sexology” was also hugely important in establishing new approaches towards sexual desire and citizenship. By merging these new ideas with existing, popular knowledge systems centred on Christian ethics, church commentators helped to popularise a miscellaneous version of sexual science among wider audiences.³⁸

From at least the mid-1920s, efforts to modernise Christian sex teaching became central to the ways in which the Anglican moral welfare organisations operated, particularly through their educational work and participation in public discussions on issues of sex, marriage, and the family. Church commentators selectively merged new sexological and psychological concepts into long-established, religiously supported frameworks of “responsible” sexual conduct in their efforts to “show that both science and morality make it clear that the spiritual and eternal must be brought into the physical if the physical is to develop and be used rightly.”³⁹ This process was difficult and full of constraints, but it became the established way in which the church’s moral welfare organisations approached their sex and marriage advice literature, aimed at heterosexual couples and unmarried men and women. Moreover, this internal strategy gained leverage throughout the interwar years. Not only did it lead to signs of change in Anglican thinking on issues of birth control, as reflected in the proceedings of the 1930 Lambeth Conference, but, gradually and tentatively, a number of interwar Anglican studies on homosexuality emerged that drew upon pastoral experience and a mixture of sexological and psychological ideas to assemble a new Christian view of homosexual identity and responsible citizenship. During the 1940s and early 1950s, the church’s moral welfare organisations helped to further crystallise and extend this approach, ultimately forming the foundations for later church support for homosexual law reform.

If we are to understand how sexual science became so pertinent to governmental discussions about homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s, we must search beyond the narrow debates of specialist groupings and

individuals and look for wider appeal. In the case of official deliberations like the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution (also known as the Wolfenden committee after its chair, John Wolfenden), it was respected professionals who gained access, such as doctors, lawyers, and policemen, as well as religiously motivated moral reform organisations like the church's moral welfare bodies.⁴⁰ Groupings of more radical sex reformers were deliberately and naturally excluded from these forums and placed themselves in opposition to existing centres of knowledge and expertise.⁴¹ Anglicans were not the only individuals or groupings to combine sexual science with existing languages of morality but, as Britain's moral guardians and established experts on issues of sex, they exerted a powerful influence. Many of the groups and individuals who gained access to government circles—including moral reform organisations, medical and legal professionals, politicians, and various other intellectuals—were willing to take their lead, at least in part, from the churches. By popularising new understandings of sex and desire, as well as outlining new approaches towards self-governing sexual citizenship, Anglicans helped to prepare the way for later changes in attitudes and approaches towards sexuality, which we often mistakenly assume suddenly appeared in the 1960s as a challenge to the authority of Christian morality. Such findings should prompt us to question our assumptions about religious decline, especially by complicating any easy division between supposedly “secular” or “religious” approaches towards sexuality in modern Britain.

DISAGREEMENT AND DIVERSITY: WHO SPEAKS FOR THE CHURCH?

This book also engages with criticisms of revisionist accounts by thoroughly exploring the complications, contradictions, and ambivalence of church policies on sex. If we are to understand how the church reached an impasse, we need to uncover the history of disagreements and difficulties in decision-making which led to this point. While the church's moral welfare organisations enjoyed successes in their efforts to modernise Christian views on sex and incorporate new approaches into mainstream Anglican thinking, they also experienced significant problems and failures. Although progressive viewpoints found a place of institutional acceptance and influence within the church, Anglican moral welfare workers expressed frustration about “apathy and indifference” and repeatedly appealed for “more energetic support from the Church at large.”⁴² Moreover, even the

church's moral welfare organisations were not immune from internal disagreements, and their efforts to compromise resulted in numerous ambiguous statements about sex.

At the heart of various controversies within church thinking was a recurring and unresolved tension between two conflicting approaches towards Christian sex ethics: the first involved adherence to a defined and unchanging moral code, and the second involved a less rule-centric morality in which notions of responsible Christian freedom and self-governance were key. While some Anglicans increasingly wanted to treat personal sexual decisions as, ultimately, matters of free choice and responsibility, others thought it right to restrict individual freedom according to perceived concerns for the welfare of the broader Christian community and the protection of public morality. Even within the church's moral welfare organisations, Anglican commentators debated the extent to which personal sexual decisions should be left to individual choices. The notion of creating self-governing sexual citizens received much support within these circles, but tension remained over the issue of corporate or social responsibility—the extent to which the needs of society and the nation outweighed the personal wants of the individual. In the years between 1918 and 1980, the clash between these contradictory impulses, and the inability of Christian thinkers to find a position of compromise, stored up many of the problems that the church is still striving to resolve. In more recent times, the Pilling report, produced by a working group appointed to advise the General Synod's House of Bishops, acknowledged the “sticking point” of the church's disagreements about sexuality is “the meaning and authority of Scripture” as either “eternal, unchanging and consistent” or open to interpretation. The report further characterised the gap between Christian ethics and contemporary culture as being centred on a disagreement about the relative importance of “a concern for the common good” and the principle of “individual freedom to choose.”⁴³ Tensions between these competing Anglican impulses thus have a long history.

A further problem that has hampered the development of more nuanced understandings about the church and sexuality is the tendency in existing historical scholarship to use terms such as “the church” and Christianity ambiguously and uncritically, without fully reflecting on whose views are represented. This has perpetuated tendencies to either overrepresent the influence of conservative Christian viewpoints, or to focus too much on moments when progressives gained the upper hand. It is crucial, however, to avoid all assumptions about a unified “church policy” or set of religious

attitudes on issues of sexual morality. As Geoffrey Fisher (Archbishop of Canterbury, 1945–61) put it, “in the Church of England and throughout the Anglican Communion we jealously guard the freedom of people to have their own opinion and express it.” For this reason, he explained, in the church “we do not line up our Bishops, except on a perfectly definite issue which is put before us, to utter with one voice.”⁴⁴ Historically, questions about sexual morality were not regarded as definite issues on which the church could formulate an official policy. To this extent, disputes and tensions were built into the nature of Anglican sexual politics. We must not, therefore, exaggerate the extent of consensus or suggest a relatively smooth and untroubled process of reconciling conflicting approaches and viewpoints within Christian institutions. On the contrary, disagreements had a profound impact on developing debates and determined the limits and extent to which the church was able to reconcile conflicting viewpoints and support changes in its teaching. This helps to explain why the advance of new Christian ideas about sex was necessarily halting, disrupted, and uncertain throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁵ Moreover, this issue continues to present problems for the contemporary church.

The uneasy development of competing approaches towards sexuality can be traced within a number of church forums, most notably in the work of the moral welfare boards and councils which assumed primary responsibility for coordinating Anglican thought and action on issues relating to sex, marriage, and the family. These organisations influenced and interacted with other voluntary and statutory providers of moral welfare support and produced numerous educational pamphlets and reports. Nevertheless, while permitted to speak on behalf of the church as its expert advisers on sexuality, Anglican moral welfare organisations did not officially speak for the church as an institution. Moreover, their pamphlets and reports were not always formally endorsed by the moral welfare bodies that published them and often made clear that responsibility for the views expressed lay solely with the working parties or individuals who wrote them.⁴⁶ For publications to gain the status of an official statement, they needed to be formally accepted by the church’s national, elected, decision-making bodies—the Church Assembly (from 1919 until 1970) or the General Synod (from 1970 onwards). But, since matters of sexuality prompted such strongly divided opinions, none of the publications issued by Anglican moral welfare organisations between 1918 and 1980 were officially endorsed in this way. The church’s governing bodies—the Convocations of Canterbury and York, the Church Assembly, and the

General Synod—rarely addressed questions of sexual morality directly and, even where they did, as in the case of the Church Assembly’s discussion of the Wolfenden report in November 1957, no clear-cut conclusions were discernible. The debate revealed fiercely opposed attitudes among members of the houses of bishops, clergy, and laity, and a vote that narrowly approved the Wolfenden recommendations to reform the law on homosexual offences did not obligate members of the church to support any particular attitude towards homosexuality, whether publicly or privately.⁴⁷

Similarly, although Lambeth Conference proceedings and House of Lords debates reflected Anglican bishops’ attitudes towards issues of sexuality, they did not represent an official or binding episcopal policy. The resolutions, encyclical letters, and committee reports produced at the decennial Lambeth Conferences were widely influential but had no legal authority. They offered only guidance to member churches, as attempts to reflect the mind of the bishops of the global Anglican Communion. Moreover, as in the case of interwar debates about birth control, there was often intense episcopal disagreement. Resolutions were formally discussed and affirmed by the whole Conference—sometimes after considerable argument—but reports carried “the authority only of the Committees by whom they were respectively prepared and presented,” and were not always unanimous.⁴⁸

As representatives of the established church in England, the bishops also held a privileged legislative role in the House of Lords. The “Lords spiritual,” comprised of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and 24 senior bishops, took their place alongside the “Lords temporal” in the upper house of the UK parliament. Yet the bishops’ interventions in parliamentary debates did not speak for the church or the episcopacy as a whole. Rather, bishops and clergy were entitled, “according to their conscience” and after taking note of “whatever lead they get from their own Church leaders and other sources,” to “join individually in the support of any cause which they feel moved to support.” As Michael Ramsey (Archbishop of York, 1956–61, and later, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1961–74) explained to the Homosexual Law Reform Society in 1959, it was not possible or desirable to “formalise” ecclesiastical support or an “official line” on questions of sexuality.⁴⁹ Church leaders were free to express opinions in various capacities: first, “with full official authority on behalf of the Church” where it was known what their diocese, Convocation, the Church Assembly, or Synod had authorised; second, with the