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THE POPE WITH BRITISH PRIME MINISTER DAVID CAMERON

David Cameron's coalition Government plans to make same-sex marriages legal in Britain, but the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh religious leaders oppose this

The Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches in Britain strongly reject the coalition Government's plan to introduce legislation that would allow same-sex marriages, and so redefine marriage.

Leaders of most other religious communities too, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh, also oppose the plan which Prime Minister David Cameron is seeking to push through.

Such a redefinition of marriage would create the most serious conflict between Church and State since the time of Henry VIII, the Church of England warned in its 13 page response earlier this week to the Government's consultation on the proposal.

It denounced the plan as "divisive", "legally flawed" and "essentially ideological" and said "the law should not seek to define away the underlying, objective distinctiveness of men and women". Such a law would amount to "abolishing" the centuries-old definition of marriage as between a man and a woman and replacing it with a vague commitment between people.

The Anglican bishop of Sheffield, Steven Croft, said the plan represented a "really, really fundamental change to an institution which has been at the core of our society for hundreds of years and which for the church is not a matter of social convention but of Christian doctrine and teaching."

The Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales flatly rejected the proposal in their submission to the Government's consultation. In an accompanying letter, Archbishop Peter Smith said that "in the interest of upholding the uniqueness of marriage as a civil institution for the common good of society, we strongly urge the government not to proceed with legislative proposals which will 'enable all couples, regardless of their gender, to have a civil marriage ceremony.'"

Last March, Archbishops Vincent Nichols and Peter Smith, the President and Vice-President of the Bishops Conference respectively, wrote a letter that was read out in all 2,500 Catholic parish churches in England and Wales, in which they said that changing the law would "gradually and inevitably transform society's understanding of the purpose of marriage."

Furthermore, they added, "there would be no recognition of the complementarity of male and female or that marriage is intended for the procreation and education of children."

Cardinal Keith O'Brien, leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland, slammed the Government's plan as "a grotesque subversion of a universally accepted human right".

Writing in The Sunday Telegraph, last March, he accused the Government of trying to "redefine reality" and said, "same-sex marriage would eliminate entirely in law the basic idea of a mother and a father for every child. It would create a society which deliberately chooses to deprive a child of either a mother or a father."

Furthermore, he said, "Since all the legal rights of marriage are already available to homosexual couples" since December 2005, "it is clear that this proposal is not about rights, but rather is an attempt to redefine marriage for the whole of society at the behest of a small minority of activists."

Gerald O'Connell