



Culture Wars and Christian Leadership

Paul Hedges



RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Culture Wars and Christian Leadership

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

In many countries, Christian communities are split on issues of gender and sexuality, which may be associated with flashpoints and wider culture wars. Tradition and innovation are challenged while aggressive activism is increasingly the favoured option going forward. The recent announcement of a new female Archbishop of Canterbury raises issues with both local and global ramifications that could impact social cohesion in nations around the world.

COMMENTARY

The rise of various political movements, often identified as far-right, have allied themselves to so-called [traditional values](#). Such groups are often presented as having a religious disposition, which in turn, has made gender and sexuality salient issues religiously, socially and politically. As a result, this phenomenon is often described as part of a culture wars approach in which far-right actors have weaponised various aspects of popular dissatisfaction within societies and tied them together.

Take gender for instance, the notion of tradwives has also been promoted by [anti-feminist](#) influencers online, with associations that a “good” Christian wife will not work but stay at home doing domestic service and also being subservient to her husband. Christianity and traditional patriarchal values are placed into one basket, often with support for a wider range of far-right political values and norms.

Regarding sexuality, the anti-LGBTQI+ stance has been associated with Christian movements in places as diverse as Russia, Hungary, and the US. In the UK, a new movement which calls itself the [King's Army](#) has recently mobilised *en masse* in London's Soho area in an attempt to intimidate the LGBTQI+ community for whom it

has traditionally been a centre of activity. The King's Army sees itself as seeking to safeguard traditional family values under a Christian banner.

Christianity, Gender and Sexuality

Across almost all Christian denominations, two of the major divisions, typically presented as progressive or traditionalist, are about gender and sexuality. With regard to the first, there is the question of whether women can have leadership roles at all and also the question of women's position in society, often associated with the term [tradwives](#) (short for traditional wives).

In terms of sexuality, the question of LGBTQI+ identities and how individuals identifying with this relate to Christian organisations and morality are debated. For instance, pastorally sensitive comments by the previous Pope, Francis I, upset some Catholics who wanted a [harsher](#) culture wars position.

While these issues affect almost every Christian tradition, questions have come to the fore for Anglicans with the announcement, on 3 October 2025, by [the Commissioners](#) charged with appointing a new Archbishop of Canterbury, in the naming of the first women in that role in an almost fifteen hundred year tradition.

A New Archbishop

Against this backdrop, the appointment of Dame Sarah Mullally as the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury, arguably the world's third most predominant Christian leadership role, has caused some consternation. An umbrella organisation of global Anglican churches, known as the Global Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans ([GAFCON](#)), has said that it cannot recognise female bishops, and has [broken off](#) communion with the Church of England given her appointment.

Mullally is clearly a qualified candidate. Ordained in 2001, she was until 2004 the Chief Nursing Officer of England, a role she was appointed to in 1999 at the age of 37. At that time, she was the [youngest person](#) in the role and was seen as remarkably effective. This earned her the title of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2005. She was seen to have the same administrative capability in her previous role as [Bishop of London](#), England's third most senior bishopric. As such, Mullally was most likely appointed because she was perceived as a very effective organisational leader and manager. Mullally herself has said her aim was the same in both, to be a Christian witness and servant, which she has glossed as "[washing feet](#)" referencing Jesus' own actions.

It is also worth noting that Mullally is appointed in the wake of [the scandal](#) over child abuse that brought down her predecessor Justin Welby. Trust in the Church and its institutions is at a low ebb. Arguably given sex scandals in mainly male-led churches across many denominations and globally, a female leader may be seen as a significant change.

Battle Lines

While GAFCON often portrays the appointment of women priests as an issue of the rest of the world versus the West, the first Anglican Church to appoint female priests was [Hong Kong](#) demonstrating a more [complex](#) situation. Certainly, there is opposition in the Church of England too, and there are 600 parishes there which do not allow women, and therefore even Archbishop of Canterbury designate, to officiate at eucharistic services.

The Church of England's, and Mullally's, position on same-sex relationships is also a point of [tension](#) with GAFCON. This again is something that they want to portray as Western moral decay affecting the Church there, but [support](#) for LGBTQI+ issues also has come from places such as the Anglican Church in South Africa. It is very much portrayed as a traditionalist versus progressive issue globally.

It is worth looking at the debates as both theological and about culture wars.

Tradition or Woke?

In terms of women priests, and therefore bishops, much depends on biblical hermeneutics or interpretation. The main text cited against women priests attributed to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 14:33b-35) is known to be an [interpolation](#), that is, it is something a later writer inserted into Paul's letters, and archaeology shows it is not in the earliest manuscripts. It is also in clear contradiction of [Paul's pro-women](#) approach elsewhere: describing women as Apostles and Presbyters (generally equated to a priest), as well as actively engaged in ministry in many areas.

Historically, women were leaders in the Church in the earliest centuries and many women seemingly carried the effective role of [bishops](#) up until medieval times. [Jesus](#) has also been described as a (proto-)feminist. For supporters of women priests, appointing a female archbishop is simply returning to the example of the Apostolic period and early church.

In terms of support for same-sex unions and LGBTQI+ rights in the church, there is little evidence that this is traditional, hence the claims that it is an innovation are correct. However, the biblical text and tradition are more complex than those opposed claim.

The New Testament texts cited against homosexuality, found in Paul's letters, speak about practices akin to male [prostitution](#) and exploitation of slaves. Supporters would point out that the Bible [nowhere condemns](#) a loving same-sex union. They also point out that things supported by the Bible, such as slavery, have now been condemned by the Church. [Biblical texts](#) on sexuality are also often based in specific contexts. As such this is not about "what the Bible says" versus "postmodern woke" attitudes but a question about the [ongoing tradition](#) and its teachings.

Conclusion

For some, these issues can be a gateway into wider [Christian extremism](#). There was some [contention](#) after the recent murder of the American right-wing political actor Charlie Kirk, who framed himself as a defender of Christian values. [His opposition](#) to LGBTQI+ identities and support for tradwives as well as his political association with America's far-right could become one of several identifying issues that bind the various strands, including [racism](#) and [Islamophobia](#), together in people's minds.

If Christian leaders become concerned about positioning themselves in a [culture wars](#) battle, there is a danger that a variety of social issues could become flashpoints, especially as they become framed as part of aggressive activism against some communities and lifestyles. That such issues are also bound up with Islamophobic attitudes is distressing policy-making and national security circles.

Dr Paul Hedges is Professor of Interreligious Studies and Associate Dean (Scholarly Ecosystems) in the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, and a Life Member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, UK.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

