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Adam and Eve or Eva and Eve: Gay Rights and Religious/Non-Religious Public Definitions of Marriage in Ghana

Existing debate has overwhelmingly focused on the role of religion in the conceptualisation of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars have noted the enormous influence of religious doctrines on forms and categories of marriage, including how religious beliefs have shaped child,¹ homosexual and heterosexual marriage practices.² Little attention has been paid to non-religious definitions and conceptualisations of marriages and sexual relationships. The fact that religious ideas about gay marriage have elicited responses from non-religious activists and communities has largely been ignored. Atheists, agnostics, or humanists, as the non-religious are variously described, have been vocal and outspoken in criticising the definition of marriage by churches, mosques and other religious bodies. Using interviews from members and other data from the social media accounts of the Humanist Association of Ghana and the concept of deprivatisation of disbelief,³ this chapter shows that religious bodies do not have a monopoly on the definition of marriage and sexual relationships. Humanists in Ghana are active participants in this debate. They have opposed the anti-gay bill which has been passed by the parliament but yet to be signed into law by the president, challenging the religious understanding of marriage.⁴ The chapter argues that such open assertions and public expressions by atheists and agnostics attest to a shifting notion of sexual norms and a plurality of perceptions and definitions of marriage in Ghana.

¹ Regin Gemignani and Quentin Wodon. "Child Marriage and faith affiliation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Stylized facts and heterogeneity," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2015): 41–43.

² Leonard Ndzi, "Homosexuality and God's Institution of Marriage: An African Evangelical Perspective," *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies* 3, no. 2 (2023): 157–159.

³ Egbert Ribberink, Peter Achterberg and Dick Houtman, "Deprivatization of disbelief?: Non-religiosity and anti-religiosity in 14 Western European Countries," *Politics and Religion* 6, no. 1 (2013): 101–105.

⁴ This bill, which some parliamentarians proposed in 2021, prohibits same-sex marriage, the engagement in same-sex intercourse and promotion of homosexual activities in Ghana. See Bahar Makooi, "Ghana: Proposed bill threatens homosexuals with long prison terms," last modified 27 October 2021, accessed, 28 December 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211027-ghana-proposed-bill-threatens-homosexuals-with-long-prison-terms>.

Introduction: Ghana and Homosexuality in the News

While addressing an Anglican Church community in February 2021, the president of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, stated that homosexuality would not be legalised under his presidency.⁵ His statement marked a slight shift from an earlier moderate position. In the early days of his presidency, Nana Akufo-Addo had stated that the issue of homosexuality was not on the agenda for Ghanaians. He noted that it would require some strong coalition to change the situation.⁶ But the later presidential declaration at the event in February 2021 elicited thunderous applause from ardent attendees, including clerics.

The pronouncement indicated that the government would lean towards the position of the church and other religious bodies in the definition of marriage and the determination of the legality or illegality of same-sex union in Ghana. As in other African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda,⁷ the issue of same-sex relationships has been widely debated and reported in the Ghanaian media.⁸ These media reports have highlighted discussions and perspectives, agreements and disagreements, propositions and oppositions to the criminalisation and decriminalisation of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. One of the reports noted the raid and closure by Ghana security forces of the office of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) rights group in Accra.⁹ Others drew attention to how the recognition of gay rights was at odds with African cultural

⁵ Kenneth Awotwe Darko, “Same-sex marriage will never happen under my Presidency – Akufo-Addo,” last modified 27 October 2021, accessed, 28 December 2023, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/same-sex-marriage-will-never-happen-under-my-presidency-akufo-addo/>.

⁶ “Homosexuality not on Ghana’s agenda – President Akufo-Addo,” last modified 9 December 2019, accessed 27 December 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2017/11/26/homosexuality-not-on-ghana-s-agenda-president-akufo-addo/>.

⁷ Leo Igwe, “Human Flourishing Beyond Religion: Homosexuality and Atheism in Kenya,” in *Law, Religion and Human Flourishing*, edited by M. Christian Green (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media: 2019), 265–267.

⁸ “Ghana set to pass anti-LGBT bill criminalising same-sex relations,” last modified 20 July 2023, accessed 12 November 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20230720-ghana-is-on-the-way-to-ratify-a-bill-criminalising-same-sex-relations>.

⁹ “Ghana security forces shut down LGBTIQ office: Rights group,” last modified 24 February 2021, accessed 21 November 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/24/ghana-shuts-down-lgbt-office-rights-group>.

norms.¹⁰ In these discussions, the voices and views of religious leaders, religious members of the public and parliament have been dominant. For instance, the spokesperson and representative of the national Imam, Sheikh Aremeyaw Shuaibu, urged the Ghanaian authorities to close down the LGBTIQ office in Accra.¹¹

Religious bodies in Ghana such as the Catholic Church, Christian Council, Pentecostal and Charismatic Council and the Coalition of Muslim Organisation¹² have largely spoken out in support of the bill and registered their opposition to the recognition of the rights of gays in the country. Incidentally, the Catholic Church in Ghana has come out with an ambiguous position supporting the bill but opposing the criminalisation of homosexuality.¹³ A Ghanaian cardinal, Peter Tuckson, has spoken out against the criminalisation of homosexuality. The catholic bishops have stated that they are against the harassment of LGBTIQ persons in the country.

Same-Sex Marriage Debate

Existing research has linked homosexuality and religion in Ghana, arguing that religion limits same-sexual practice and expressions.¹⁴ Scholars have noted that religion influences the politics and perceptions of same-sex relationships.¹⁵ Religious institutions in Ghana have opposed the legalisation of marriage for LGBTIQ

¹⁰ Leah Asmelash, “A proposed law in this country would require citizens to report LGBTQ people to authorities,” last modified 13 September 2023, accessed 30 November 2023 <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/13/africa/ghana-lgbtq-community-fears-cec/index.html>.

¹¹ “Close LGBTQ Accra office, declare your stance – Sheikh Aremeyaw to Government,” last modified 23 February 2021, accessed 21 November 2023, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/close-lgbtq-accra-office-declare-your-stance-sheikh-aremeyaw-to-government/>.

¹² “NDC primaries: Muslim organisations back anti-gay MPs,” last modified 9 May 2023, accessed 29 December 2023, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/NDC-primaries-Muslim-organisations-back-anti-gay-MPs-1763189>.

¹³ Roberto Igual, “Ghana: Catholic Church flip-flops on LGBTQ+ rights,” last modified 2 December 2023, accessed 26 December 2023 <https://www.mambaonline.com/2023/12/02/ghana-catholic-church-flip-flops-on-lgbtq-rights/>.

¹⁴ Seth Tweneboah, “Religion, International Human Rights Standards, and the Politicisation of Homosexuality in Ghana,” *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2018): 26–27.

¹⁵ John Anarfi and Angela Gyasi-Gyamerah, “Religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality: Views of Ghanaian university students,” *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 25 (2014):194–196.

persons.¹⁶ The religious apparatus has been deployed against the expression and manifestation of homosexual norms. Incidentally, the link between non religion,¹⁷ while same-sex marriage in Africa has not received adequate scholarly attention. Given the heated debate on gay marriage in Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria, and the prominent roles that religious bodies such as the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council,¹⁸ Christian Council of Ghana and the Ghana Catholic Bishop Conference have played in the discussions,¹⁹ there has not been enough focus by students of religion on this intriguing development on the African religious landscape. Lack of scholarly attention on non-religious definitions of marriage could be attributed to the widely acknowledged invisibility of non-religious persons and groups in the region.²⁰

Religious organisations have been open and public in their proposition regarding and definition of marriage. These propositions have been used to oppose bills on sex education and the rights of LGBTIQ.²¹ However, non-religious groups and activists have not remained mute. In Kenya, atheists rallied against the state ban on a film that was believed to promote homosexuality.²² Individuals who self-describe as humanists or atheists have responded and challenged the positions of religious organisations. Humanists have spoken out against religious homophobia and moves to criminalise same-sex relationships. They have used debates on same-sex marriage to assert their critical and dissenting views, as well as their public objections to religious positions and propositions. Deprivatisation

¹⁶ Justice Yaw Adua, *Religion and Homosexuality in Ghana: Assessing the Factors Constraining the Legalisation of Homosexuality in Ghana: A Study of the Klottey Korle Sub-Metropolitan Area of Accra* (PhD dissertation, University of Ghana, 2018).

¹⁷ Phil Zuckerman, Luke W. Galen, and Frank L. Pasquale, *The nonreligious: Understanding secular people and societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14.

¹⁸ "Government must summon foreign diplomats supporting LGBTQ+ in Ghana," last modified 24 February 2021, accessed 29 December 2023, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Govt-must-summon-foreign-diplomats-supporting-LGBTQI-in-Ghana-1188379>.

¹⁹ "Ghana's family system strictly against homosexuality – Christian Council," last modified 25 February 2021, accessed 29 December 2023, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Ghana-s-family-system-strictly-against-homosexuality-Christian-Council-1188850>.

²⁰ Yonatan N Gez, Nadia Beider, and Helga Dickow, "African and not religious: The state of research on Sub-Saharan religious nones and new scholarly horizons," *Africa Spectrum* 57, no. 1 (2022): 50–71.

²¹ "Ghanaian groups oppose introducing sex education," last modified 1 October 2019, accessed 3 December 2023, <https://www.dailyfinland.fi/worldwide/12695/Ghanaian-groups-oppose-introducing-sex-education>.

²² "Ban on gay film is uncalled for', says the Atheists in Kenya Society," last modified 24 September 2021, accessed 29 December 2023, <https://humanists.international/2021/09/ban-on-gay-film-is-uncalled-for-says-the-atheists-in-kenya-society/>.

of disbelief refers to processes of coming out by atheists. The processes entail expressions of anti-religious sentiments and arguing for a removal of religion from the political or public domain. Through such expressions, disbelievers transform “an indifferent ‘non-religiosity’ into an assertive ‘anti-religiosity’”.²³ Scholars of religion have yet to explain how expressions of disbelievers relate to the debate on same-sex marriage in Ghana, especially with surveys suggesting deep religiosity among Ghanaians,²⁴ and existing stereotypical notions and representations of Africans as notoriously religious.²⁵ Expressions of anti-religious sentiments translate these dispositions into assertive and public declarations,²⁶ with consequences on social situations, norms and formations. With this in view, this chapter explains how Ghanaians who are not religious contribute to public discussions on marriage.

Religious and Non-Religious Demographics in Ghana

Ghana is a country where most of the population identifies as religious, and in 2012 Ghana was polled as the most religious nation on earth followed by another West African country, Nigeria.²⁷ Christianity, Islam and indigenous faiths are the main religions. Citing the 2010 government census, the 2019 International Religious Freedom Report states that approximately 71 percent of Ghana’s population is Christian, 20 percent is Muslim, three percent identifies as indigenous/animistic believers, while 6 percent of the population professes other religions or has no religion.²⁸ Statistically, the non-religious in Ghana are in single digits. Christianity and Islam have not always been dominant in Ghana, while religious constituencies have an enormous influence on policies and legislations in Ghana. The Na-

23 Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman, “Deprivatization of disbelief?,” 101–105.

24 Harriet Sherwood, “Young more religious than old in only two countries in world,” last modified 13 June 2018, accessed 20 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/13/young-more-religious-than-old-in-only-two-countries-in-world>.

25 John Mbiti, *African religions & philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1990), 1.

26 Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman, “Deprivatization of disbelief?”, 101–105.

27 Sedefka V. Beck and Sara J. Gundersen, “A gospel of prosperity? An analysis of the relationship between religion and earned income in Ghana, the most religious country in the world,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 1 (2016): 105–106.

28 US State Department, “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ghana,” accessed 30 December 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/ghana/>.

tional Christian Cathedral has been a divisive issue and has generated heated debate and opposition from some segments of the public. The cathedral project has been noted as an example of religion ‘hijacking’ politics, as a waste of resources, a violation of the secularity of Ghana and a disturbance of its perception as a religiously plural country.²⁹ Ghanaians who profess no religious belief, atheists, agnostics or humanists are in the minority and have very restricted spheres of influence. However, christian, and islamic religious groups have been visible and active in shaping and influencing policies as illustrated in the debate on the criminalisation and non-criminalisation of homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

Anti-Gay Bill and Religious Support in Ghana

On 2 August 2021, the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, also known as the Anti-Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender, Plus (LGBTQ+) Bill went through a first reading in the Parliament of Ghana. The bill makes it illegal to be gay and to advocate gay rights in the country. The first reading is a stage in legislating a bill and provides opportunities for other parliamentarians to provide input and contribute to the legislation process. Sam Nartey George, a member of parliament from the oppositional National Democratic Congress along with seven other MPs brought in this bill that penalises same sexual relationships. The bill claims to provide proper human sexual rights and Ghanaian family values, and proscribes LGBT and related activities. Homosexuality is already prohibited in the country. The bill is an effort to reinforce the illegality of homosexuality in Ghana. The bill punishes those who encourage homosexuality, including those who defend LGBT persons or publish information on homosexuality. In addition, the National Coalition for Proper Human Rights and Sexual Values is proposing a gay conversion therapy programme that will deploy counsellors and spiritualists “to develop a holistic sexual therapy system for dealing with this problem”.³⁰

The overwhelming impression is that homosexuality is un-African and the move to uphold the rights of gay people and legalise same-sex marriage is a part

²⁹ George M. Bob-Milliar and Karen Lauterbach, “The Politics of a National Cathedral in Ghana: A Symbol of a Corrupted Government, or Reaching Wakanda?” last modified 21 January 2019, accessed 10 April 2024, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/the-politics-of-a-national-cathedral-in-ghana-a-symbol-of-a-corrupted-government-or-reaching-wakanda/>.

³⁰ Victoria Kissiedu, “A Coalition to outdoor holistic therapy for homosexuality,” last modified 26 September 2019, accessed 30 November 2023. <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/a-holistic-therapy-to-deal-with-homosexuals-moses-foh-amaoning.html>.

of the Western agenda.³¹ Support for the bill is an attempt to counter the efforts by the West to impose the gay agenda on Africa. Even though there has not been any confirmed attempt to legalise same-sex marriage, there have been concerns over some covert attempts by Western governments to force African countries to uphold the rights of LGBTQ+ persons and make same-sex relationships acceptable.³² Religious organisations including the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, Church of Pentecost, and Advocates for Christ expressed total support for the bill.³³ Other supporters of the bill have been vocal and strident in their opposition to homosexual relationships and same-sex marriage in Ghana. A christian parliamentarian threatened to beat up the Australian ambassador to Ghana for advocating LGBTIQ+ rights.³⁴ The speaker of the parliament, who described himself as a catholic, stated that he would rather die than see homosexuality legalised in Ghana.³⁵ A catholic bishop also urged the parliament to legislate against same sex marriage in Ghana because homosexual practices were incompatible with Ghanaian customs and church teachings.³⁶ The Catholic Bishop Conference urged the government not to yield to international pressure by legalising gay marriage in the country.

The Adam and Steve Definition of Marriage

Central to the debate on the LGBTI bill is the definition of marriage and what constitutes a proper and acceptable form of sexual and family relationships. The bill is an attempt to protect and preserve the religious definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, otherwise known as the union between

31 Lere Amusan, Luqman Saka and O. Adekeye Muinat, "Gay rights and the politics of anti-homosexual legislation in Africa," *Journal of African Union Studies* 8, no. 2 (2019): 45–66.

32 Hakeem Onapajo and Christopher Isike, "The Global Politics of Gay Rights: The Straining Relations between the West and Africa," *Journal of Global Analysis* 6, no. 1 (2016): 21–45.

33 Ryan Truscott, "Ghana Churches Push Law to Combat Promotion of Homosexuality," last modified 2 October 2021, accessed 20 November 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/october/ghana-lgbt-bill-family-values-same-sex-advocates.html>.

34 "Fearless" Sam George claps back at Australian Ambassador on LGBTQ+ legalization," last modified 3 May 2021, accessed 30 December 2023, https://www.mynewsgh.com/fearless-sam-george-claps-back-at-australian-ambassador-on-lgbtq-legalization/?expand_article=1.

35 Prince Adu-Owusu, "I prefer to die than to see LGBTQ legalised – Alban Bagbin," last modified 13 June 2023, accessed 31 December 2023, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/i-prefer-to-die-than-to-see-lgbtq-legalised-alban-bagbin/>.

36 Emmanuel Modey, "Catholic Bishop urges Parliament to enact laws against LGBTQI," last modified 10 April 2021, accessed 30 December 2023, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/catholic-bishop-urges-parliament-to-enact-laws-against-lgbtqi.html>.

Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve or Eva and Eve.³⁷ The objective of the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill was to protect this form of family and sexual relationships, and ensure that the state did not alter this family formation. The religious definition of marriage rejects a union between Adam and Steve or a union between Eva and Eve. A proper sexual relationship is heterosexual, not homosexual. The christian and muslim definitions regard homosexual or same-sex acts, marriage and other relationships as improper, unacceptable, and therefore should be criminalised. The responses and reactions of religious bodies and their parliamentary allies have been overwhelmingly in support of the bill and the tightening of the prohibition of homosexuality and same sex marriage. However, in the past decade, the non-religious public, humanists, and atheists in Ghana are beginning to organise and make their positions known. They have become increasingly assertive and visible in the media. They weigh in and contribute to issues of public interest such as sex education, human rights, and now gay marriage and same-sex relationships. The Humanist Association of Ghana (HAG) has been leading this initiative. HAG has been vocal in challenging the religious idea of marriage and religious opposition to LGBTIQ rights and same-sex marriage in the country.

The Humanist Association of Ghana: Non-Religiosity and Ethical Lifestyles Informed by Reason

The Humanist Association of Ghana was formed at an international conference in Accra in 2012.³⁸ The conference brought together humanists and other non-religious persons from across Nigeria and other West African countries. HAG was not the first humanist association in Ghana. The Rational Center, which started in the 1980s, was the rallying point for all humanists, atheists and agnostics in the country.³⁹ But the group became defunct when the founder, Hope Tawiah, passed away in 2009. HAG's Twitter account states that the organisation promotes ethical

³⁷ Toni Lester, "Adam and Steve vs. Adam and Eve: Will the New Supreme Court Grant Gays the Right to Marry," *Am. UJ Gender Soc. Pol'y & L.* 14 (2006): 253.

³⁸ Chris Stein, "In world's most religious country, humanists rally for secular space," last modified 25 November 2012, accessed 30 December 2023, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2012/1125/In-world-s-most-religious-country-humanists-rally-for-secular-space>.

³⁹ Leo Igwe, "Humanism in Ghana," last modified 11 March 2014, accessed 12 November 2023, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/Humanism-in-Ghana-302995>.

lifestyles that are informed by reason,⁴⁰ whilst its Facebook page explains that HAG is a “volunteer organisation of atheists/agnostics living in Ghana who subscribe to humanism as a life stance, and fight to protect human rights and promote critical thinking”.⁴¹ On its website, HAG is described as “an organization of atheists/agnostics living in Ghana who subscribe to humanism as a life stance, fight to protect human rights and promote critical thinking. We believe we can create a better society through discussion and action based on science, reason, and respect for human dignity”.⁴² The website contains posts on various topics including scepticism in leadership, queer love in Ghana, humanist myths and traditions, etc.

In Ghana, going open and public as an atheist or a humanist is fraught with risks and difficulties. Kofi, one of the founding members of the Humanist Association of Ghana recounted to me how he became a humanist:

Though I have held humanist principles without ever knowing humanism. I had been irreligious since I was around the age of 13. That is not to say I was particularly religious from the start. My family believes in some deity of a sort, but they have always given us room to think for ourselves. I was not particularly pressed to attend religious meetings such as church services throughout the time I lived in Accra and when I did visit my hometown, Tema, I was not engaged in any superstitious or cultural activities since that is the domain of adults. This allowed me to entertain ideas without practicing them and then take them apart intellectually to see their deficiencies in attempting to solve human problems both physically and emotionally.⁴³

As Kofi noted, living away from family members was an advantage because it made it possible for him to think independently and explore ideas and outlooks without much pressure or coercion from relatives or community members. Family relationships are very important in Ghana because state institutions are weak. Many humanists rely on their families for social support and educational sponsorship. Thus, going against the grain of family religion and faith could be costly and risky. It has consequences including ostracisation, abandonment, and disinheritance.

⁴⁰ Humanist Association of Ghana (@HumanistsGH), “Humanist Association of Ghana Stands For Humane Values & Ethical Lifestyles Informed By Reason. We Promote Critical Thinking & Human Rights,” Twitter, 30 December 2023, <https://twitter.com/humanistsgh>.

⁴¹ Humanist Association of Ghana, “A volunteer organization of atheists/agnostics living in Ghana who subscribe to humanism,” Facebook, accessed 20 November 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/humanistsGH/>.

⁴² “Humanist Association of Ghana,” accessed 27 December 2023, <https://ghanahumanists.org/index.php/about-us/>.

⁴³ Kwame Kofi, 16 March 2021.

But in the case of Kofi, it was different. As he further explains:

That upbringing allowed me to explore different ideas and question them at home and among my peers. Soon enough, I found myself thinking along atheistic lines before I could apply the term to myself years later. I remember vividly having late-night debates on religion using logic in my high school years at Tema. Though many were fervently religious, they did concede that they would not budge in their belief in a deity; they found my logic and arguments against the existence of gods sound. My conclusion from playing with these different ideas from all over the world led me closer to my current form.⁴⁴

Thus, Kofi attributes his current humanist and atheistic stance to the ability to question and freely explore ideas. Kofi became an atheist when he was at university and as a university student he started yearning for a community of like minds:

I became a full-blown atheist while at university and increasingly needed a community to bond with in a hyper-religious society like my country. That led me to meet up with other freethinkers in Ghana, most of whom were based in Accra. On vacation, I attended a couple of meetings and made great friends. In one such meeting, after our usual philosophical discussions, we agreed that it was not enough to simply be an atheist. What then did we do? It came to a point that we agreed with the humanist worldview and have mostly been living it as a part of our atheistic lives. We founded the Humanist Association of Ghana with that backdrop. We have organised two West African conferences and have been growing ever since.⁴⁵

Another founding member of the Humanist Association of Ghana and currently the vice-president of Humanists International, Mould told me how she became a humanist: “I set out on a journey of objective, personal research and understanding of religion, especially christianity, to convert my European friends and ended up de-converting myself”.⁴⁶

In an article that was published on the Ghana web, using the pen name Lyn, she further noted:

I became an unbeliever in 2007. It started with the idea of yearning for more knowledge on Christianity, specifically, the Catholic religion I grew up in. I was in a Catholic parish and attended primary, and secondary Catholic schools. My mother’s side of the family is mainly Catholic and my father’s side, Anglican. I was a communicant by age 10 and got confirmed in the Holy Spirit while in my secondary school when I was 18 years old. All my catechism and confirmation classes were my decision. Even at that young age, I wanted to believe in god. I entertained some doubts about religion when my mum died when I was four, but I

⁴⁴ Kofi, March 2021.

⁴⁵ Kofi, March 2021.

⁴⁶ Ros Mould, 12 March 2021.

could not question it because I thought religion must be true since everyone that I knew was religious. It was on my journey of research, and through the will to empower myself with facts about my religion, that I gradually, and painfully, de-converted myself.⁴⁷

But Mould remained a closet atheist until 2012, when she attended the humanist conference in Accra. She further explained:

I declared myself an atheist when I attended my first meeting in 2012 with other atheists and agnostics living in Ghana. Hearing their stories and sharing information made me realise that I had not even scratched the surface of my research and barely knew anything regarding the amount of information and knowledge that was out there. I was not alone or crazy – there are atheists in Ghana! My first-ever international humanist conference that year cemented my non-belief. Ghana was not alone! There were atheists from Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia. I was in awe that we existed across the continent. Since then, my confidence grew and I decided to come out to friends and family. Luckily, I have an open-minded family and loyal friends. Though they do not understand, I am still loved, accepted, and respected for my opinions, unlike some I met through the Humanist Association of Ghana and freethought meetings. Others had been stigmatized, disowned by their families, and even declared witches!⁴⁸

As in Kenya and Nigeria,⁴⁹ social media has been instrumental to the growing visibility of atheists and in connecting sceptics and agnostics in Ghana and other places in the region. Social media shields irreligious Africans from persecution and censorship and enables humanists and atheists to assert their views and present positions on issues of public interest without much fear of retribution. Even though they are in the minority, humanists and other non-religious persons in Ghana have been assertive of their views and opposition, as has been the case with the anti-gay bill.

Countering Religious Definitions of Same-Sex Relationships in Ghana

As individuals and as an organisation, non-religious persons in Ghana responded to the anti-LGBTIQ bill and the move to criminalise same-sex marriage. Kofi told me how, as a humanist, the opposition to the anti-gay bill was a logically necessary step:

⁴⁷ Lyn Ros, "Why am an atheist – part 1," last modified 18 May 2014, accessed 20 November 2023, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/religion/artikel.php?ID=309652>.

⁴⁸ Ros, "Why am an atheist – part 1."

⁴⁹ Leo Igwe, "Human Flourishing Beyond Religion: Homosexuality and Atheism in Kenya," 2019.

Support for the rights of homosexuals is a logical step to take when one accepts that a religious worldview that is used to persecute people for their gender and sexuality is flawed. To be a humanist means to accept humans in all our differences in race, gender, and sex, among others. Equality becomes the operational word and if one wants equality, then one cannot stand by while others are denied basic decency and respect. My journey into LGBTQ+ activism started on my Facebook wall. I made my opinion known to my friends online and family first. That came with a backlash, but that was something I had anticipated, so it was mentally easy to deal with that. However, that is not the same story for other humanists and activists.⁵⁰

Kofi noted that the humanist outlook compelled one to challenge and oppose flawed religious doctrines, especially the idea of sexuality and marriage by religious organisations. He further noted that his opposition to the bill was based on common sense and international law:

The reason for my support and engagement in the discussion is a matter of common sense and international law. What individuals do that does not infringe upon the rights of others should not be criminalized. Any law that prevents anyone from loving whom they want is problematic and not the individuals involved. Any system that seeks to make people's identity illegal is plain wrong and ludicrous, and as such, must be countered with the might of the human intellect and heart till victory in equality is attained and empathy reigns supreme.⁵¹

Humanists are of the view that religious positions and prescriptions, which include their definitions of marriage and proper sexual relationships, are often based on faith and dogma, not common sense, on divine rules and commandants in the sacred texts, not national or international laws. The LGBTIQ bill shows that religious constituencies lobby and campaign to ensure that their positions and propositions become state laws and policies on marriage and sexual norms.

In the same vein, Mould states how she got involved in gay rights activism:

I have been advocating for LGBT Rights personally and more intensely since 2015, when I became Chair of the IHEYO African Working Group and President of the Humanist Association of Ghana. Since then, the LGBT community has had me involved in many programmes. Last year, the LGBT+ Rights Ghana group chose me as a Board Member to assist in the running of the group and I was invited to participate in the event to mark the opening of the first-ever LGBT Office in Accra by the group, which was attended many dignitaries including the Australian Ambassador, Ambassador of the EU to Ghana and the Danish Ambassador. The opening sparked outrage from homophobes in the country.⁵²

50 Kofi, March 2021.

51 Kofi, March 2021.

52 Mould, March, 2021.

Before the bill was brought to parliament, faith groups engaged in the mobilisation of their members and constituencies. Mould recounted the role of religious organisations in the move to criminalise same-sex marriage in Ghana:

For years, many religious groups, leaders, and organisations have been against the rights of LGBT+ people, and in recent times since the opening of the LGBT+ Rights Ghana Office, they have put a lot of pressure on the government to shut down the office, arrest the organisers of the event and send foreign diplomats who supported the group back to their countries [. . .]. The National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values has been at the forefront of this homophobic campaign. A lawyer, Moses Foh Amoaning, leads the campaign. He intends to start gay conversion therapy and introduce a private membership bill to parliament by the end of March, to prosecute all LGBT+ persons and activists.⁵³

As Mould noted, religious groups have been strongly in support of the clampdown on LGBT persons in Ghana. Religious support for the prohibition of same-sex relationships was predicated on the definition of marriage as a relationship between Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve or Eva and Eve. Since the bill was brought before the parliament in Ghana, Mould has spoken out internationally against it. She shared a statement with me that she made at a UN session. She said:

In reality, the current anti-LGBT bill under the name “Ghanaian Family Values Bill” seeks to target only perceived or real LGBT persons, which would leave every Ghanaian as a target in one way or another. The Bill infringes on the right to privacy, expression, movement, association, housing and education, etc. Apart from the eight MPs who propagated the bill, some present and past government officials, including the current Speaker of Parliament, have spoken in favour of the bill. They have spoken against the LGBT community and allied groups, individuals, and even the diplomatic corps since the raiding of an LGBT community space in 2021. The office was established to address issues of abuse, and discrimination, and to support the community with medical, legal, and financial aid. There has been intimidation of other Honourable MPs into supporting the Bill and there has not been any opportunity to dialogue with the LGBT community or its allies, despite the strong opposition to the Bill by many Ghanaians with three lawsuits against the Attorney General and Speaker of Parliament pending in court.⁵⁴

In addition, Mould has used her position as a board member of Humanists International to urge foreign organisations to desist from exporting gay hate to Ghana.⁵⁵

This effort by American fundamentalists and far-right evangelical Christian groups to spread their message of hate on the African continent and in my beloved country, when it

53 Mould, March, 2021.

54 Roslyn Mould, email message to author, 11 July 2023.

55 Humanists International is the global representative body of the humanist movement. See “About Humanists International,” Accessed 29 December 2023, <https://humanists.international/about/>.

has failed in theirs, will not be tolerated [. . .]. Homophobia was foreign to Africans until colonization and here we are again with history repeating itself. As a Humanist, I condemn the actions of these groups in their promotion of hate, inequality, [the] undermining of women's rights to reproductive health, and their [the] imposition of their religious ideas of "family" on us. This reeks of imperialism and a total disregard off[or]human rights.⁵⁶

As noted from the quotation, there is an international religious dimension to the campaign for the criminalisation of same-sexual relationships in Ghana. Humanists have called out these religious groups, especially American fundamentalists, for their role. These fundamentalists are conservative evangelical Christian groups in the US, with bases in Kenya and Zimbabwe that sponsor and promote anti-abortion and anti-gay agendas in Africa.⁵⁷

As an association, humanists and atheists in Ghana have reacted to the bill before the parliament. The president of the association, Boasiako, told a local news agency that the bill was a distraction and not a priority given the socio-economic challenges that Ghanaians were facing. He said that the focus on the bill showed the parliamentarians' lack of understanding of their constitutional duties and responsibilities:

We have a country of 30 million people with a lot of problems on our hands and we are trying to solve them. For the Speaker of Parliament to think of this as a worthy problem to solve or a worthy cause to take especially against your citizens, I do not understand. I do not know where this is coming from. This level of homophobia is just unbelievable coming from somebody who has sworn to serve all the people in Ghana.⁵⁸

Boasiako stated that parliament should not sanction or legitimise hate or intolerance of people of the same sex who love or marry each other. He further noted that the bill violated the human rights of Ghanaians: "Concerning our current laws, what the Speaker is proposing or alluding to is stamping down on freedom of expression, freedom of belief or even of advocating, and they gave us a statement with what they did to the 21 LGBTQ in Ho".⁵⁹ As Boasiako noted, the police

⁵⁶ Roslyn Mould, "America's Christian Far right should not be exporting their hate to Ghana," last modified 1 November 2019, accessed 20 November 2023, <https://humanists.international/2019/11/roslyn-mould-americas-christian-far-right-should-not-be-exporting-their-hate-to-ghana/>.

⁵⁷ David Smith, "US evangelical Christians accused of promoting homophobia in Africa," last modified 24 July 2012, accessed 20 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/24/evangelical-christians-homophobia-africa>.

⁵⁸ "Humanist Association of Ghana Slam Parliament's Latest Move Against Homosexuals & Lesbians," last modified 24 June 2021, accessed 20 October 2023, <https://www.peacefmonline.com/pages/local/social/202106/447301.php>.

⁵⁹ "Humanist Association of Ghana Slam Parliament's Latest Move Against Homosexuals & Lesbians," 2021.

arrested 21 persons, 16 females and five males, suspected of being gay. These persons were attending a conference in Ho, a capital city in the Volta region of Ghana. They were charged with unlawful assembly. The court denied them bail several times and later acquitted them due to lack of sufficient evidence for their prosecution.⁶⁰

In the same vein, the Communications Officer of the Humanist Association of Ghana, Okai Allotey, whose Twitter handle has the hashtag QueerLivesMatter, told me that HAG joined a campaign for the release of the 21 LGBT rights activists in response to the wave of homophobic bigotry sweeping across the country. The organisation went on national television to condemn the arrest and urged the government to free the activists.⁶¹ The Humanist Association shared this post on its Twitter (X) page: “It has become apparent that our government intends to continue the persecution of LGBT folks and even plans to criminalize advocacy. We were given a taste of this with the detention and continues [sic] persecution of the #HO21”.⁶²

As Boasiako further noted:

This is not just an LGBT rights issue but a power play, an attack on the foundation of any liberal society – freedom of speech and expression, freedom of thought and conscience, as well as freedom to assemble. Anyone who disagrees with or tries to exercise their democratic right to have their views heard is quashed by either fabricated charges or through expensive legal proceedings. We are all to comply or face the wrath of our pseudo-dictators. We must fight this or forever lose the soul of this country to bigotry!⁶³

As the statement from Boasiako has suggested, the bill and the state clampdown on the LGBT community provided humanists and atheists in Ghana with the opportunity to highlight homophobic bigotry, religious dogmatism and oppression. Irreligious Ghanaians used the debate on homosexuality to express their disbelief in religious doctrines and propositions. The bill has given the non-religious constituency in Ghana the chance to foreground the flaws and gaps in religious morality, as well as religious ideas of marriage and sexual relationships.

⁶⁰ Agence France-Presse in Accra, “Ghana court frees 21 arrested for attending May LGBTQ+ event,” last modified 5 August 2021, accessed 20 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/05/ghana-court-frees-21-arrested-for-attending-may-lgbtq-event>.

⁶¹ TV3 Ghana, “Arrest of 21 Activists,” accessed 20 November 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNc1zWcHyKI>.

⁶² Humanist Association of Ghana, “It has become apparent that our government intends to continue the persecution of LGBT folks,” Twitter, 23 June 2021, 7.34 pm, <https://twitter.com/humanistsgh/status/1407768993214181389>.

⁶³ Antwi Kwabena Boasiako, email to the author, 23 June 2021.

In the same vein, Mould told me that the fight against homophobic bigotry was consistent with the humanist outlook:

Humanism is a life stance that I have chosen. It is devoid of dogmatic, religious or superstitious ways of thought. It embraces scientific, logical ways of thought based on compassion. I believe in the Human rights of all LGBTQI+ people and I believe in fighting for a better world for all, especially marginalised groups such as the LGBT+ community, hence my passion in defending their rights as a Humanist. I believe that people should not be discriminated against, abused, or stigmatized on account of their sexual orientation or gender identity. I believe that homophobia is a form of hate and should be eradicated from society.⁶⁴

Furthermore, the Humanist Association of Ghana joined 16 other NGOs and sent a memorandum to parliament. In the memorandum, they outlined grounds for opposing the bill. They noted that the bill's broad restrictions on expression, assembly, information, and association by criminalising gay rights advocacy undermined the work of human rights organisations in Ghana. The memorandum also noted that restrictions on expression and association put human rights defenders, including humanists and atheists in Ghana, at risk of violence, arbitrary arrests and harassment. They noted that the bill undermined the idea of a family that embraced love and care for one another and infringed on the rights of freedom of speech, right to freedom of religion or belief, right to privacy, right to housing and freedom from discrimination.

Two humanists from the association, Okai-Allotey and Mould, made individual submissions to parliament on the bill. In his submission, Okai-Allotey described the bill as inhuman and a violation of the constitutional rights of Ghanaians. He submitted the following:

This proposed bill essentially curtails the right of Ghanaians to assembly, free speech and joining any organisation of their choice. The bill further criminalizes advocacy for the rights of these sexual minority groups, which is a clear affront to our 1992 constitution. If allowed to be passed, this bill is going to have far-reaching consequences for the rights and freedoms of a lot of Ghanaians. Ghana is a secular country with a religious majority. It bestows upon us the opportunity to protect minority groups, which is the opposite of what this bill seeks to do[. . .] I recommend that this proposed bill be rejected, as it does not accord with Ghana's democratic values of freedom and justice for all its citizens.⁶⁵

In her submission to parliament, Mould noted the bill tried to impose a definition of what is culturally and religiously proper on Ghanaian society, which is culturally and religiously diverse. She stated:

⁶⁴ Mould, March, 2021.

⁶⁵ Justice Okai-Allotey, *Memorandum to the Clerk*, Committee on Constitutional, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Office of Parliament, Osu-Accra, 30 September 2021.

The Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill first proposed by the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values seeks to suggest that they intend to define what is ‘proper’ for Humans in terms of their sexuality and also attempt to define and impose their ideas of what they term to be ‘Ghanaian’. Ghana, as a country, is a diverse and inclusive society of people from various histories, tribes, religious and non-religious belief systems, and cultures, all of which are protected and enshrined in our Constitution and therefore should not be amended or reinterpreted by any number of people to infringe on Human rights.⁶⁶

In her submission, Mould rejected the bill’s idea of what is sexually proper for Ghanaians, noting the diversity and plurality of what could be deemed sexually proper in Ghana. She also pointed out how the bill violated the freedom of religion or belief of Ghanaians:

The Bill would also seek to set Ghana back from achieving Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)[. . .]. Ghana must be guided by the principles set out in Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (UNDHR) on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. Therefore, a group’s rights to FoRB should not infringe on the rights of others.⁶⁷

She further drew attention to shifts and changes in other parts of the world that christians and muslims in Ghana could emulate. Mould indicated that unlike Ghana, christians and muslims in Europe and America had started shifting their positions and becoming supportive of LGBTI rights and same-sex marriage:

Many christian groups across the world have also come to understand the importance of upholding the human rights of LGBTI+ persons and acknowledge the damage done to others due to homophobia using religion as a tool. In recent times, the Methodist Church allowed same-sex marriage in a “momentous” vote. As far back as 1978, the Presbyterian Church has called for civil rights for all people, regardless of sexual orientation. Pope Francis made news by voicing his support for same-sex civil unions – legal arrangements that give gay and lesbian couples many of the same rights as married opposite-sex couples. The Catholic Church teaches that, as a person does not choose to be either homosexual or heterosexual, being gay is not inherently sinful. The archbishops of Canterbury and York, Justin Welby and Stephen Cottrell, respectively, said in a joint foreword to “Living in Love and Faith” that the church had caused, and continued to cause, “hurt and unnecessary suffering”. “For such acts, each of us, and the church collectively, should be deeply ashamed and repentant”, wrote the leader of the Church of England and its second-most senior figure. According to a recent survey by the Public Religion Research Center, more than half (52 percent) of American Muslims agreed that “society should approve of homosexuality”. A growing number of Islamic scholars, mainly in the

⁶⁶ Roslyn Mould *Memorandum to the Clerk*, Committee on Constitutional, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Office of Parliament, Osu-Accra, September 30, 2021.

⁶⁷ Mould *Memorandum to the Clerk*.

West, have started re-examining Islamic teachings on same-sex relationships and whether a blanket condemnation of LGBTQ people is a misinterpretation.⁶⁸

Thus, humanists and other members of the non-religious public in Ghana are involved in the debate on the anti-LGBTIQ bill and use the discussion to register their objections and disbelief in religious ideas, doctrines and notions of marriage and sexual relationships.

Conclusions

We have explored the contested definitions of marriage, including the debates and controversies over religious and irreligious notions, propositions and oppositions to LGBTIQ rights and same-sex marriage in Ghana. To resist the perceived move by Western countries to redefine and impose on Africa their definition of marriage and family values, some parliamentarians sponsored an anti-gay bill. They brought before parliament the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, which provides harsh punishments for those who advocate gay rights or practice same-sex relationships. This bill, which upholds the religious definition of marriage and proper sexual relationship as heterosexual, or as strictly an Adam and Eve affair, has elicited responses from humanist and human rights groups, whilst religious organisations in Ghana have overwhelmingly rallied in support of the bill and the criminalisation of LGBTIQ rights and same-sex relationships.

Against the impression in religious discourses of the marginality or invisibility of the non-religious in Africa, humanists, atheists, and other members of the non-religious public in Ghana have increasingly been active and assertive of their position and opposition to the bill. They have rallied with other local and international organisations to denounce the provisions in the bill, especially the religious definition of sexual and marriage norms. As a group and as individuals, the non-religious constituency in Ghana has used multiple channels to register its opposition to religious notions of marriage and sexual relationships.

Atheists, agnostics, and other persons who have no religion are partnering with the gay community and other human rights groups to fight bigotry, especially efforts to impose on the people of Ghana the religious idea of marriage as a union between Adam and Eve. By opposing the anti-LGBTI bill, humanists have become active participants in the debate, and key players in the definition and

68 Mould *Memorandum to the Clerk*.

redefinition of marriage in Ghana. The non-religious public is suggesting a plurality of marriage and sexual norms, the acceptability of homosexual relationships and a broader definition of marriage beyond a union between Adam and Eve to include a union between Adam and Steve or a union between Eva and Eve.

However, a lot is unknown about the emerging non-religious public in Ghana, how the position and opposition would impact on the legislation of the anti-gay bill, the religious or state definitions of marriage and sexual relationships. How the growing assertiveness of humanists and atheists would shape the religion and state relationship, the perception, and representation of non-religiosity or irreligiosity in a religious nation like Ghana, is a matter for further research and exploration.

