Introduction
This chapter will consider religion in relation to intimate life. Intimate life pertains to the range of personal relationships forged and emotions experienced in what has traditionally been understood as the private sphere, although scholars have emphasised that intimate life is also embedded in public spaces (Hochschild 2003; May 2011; Smart 2007). Intimate life is a concept that disrupts the taken-for-grantedness of a ‘family’ formation. The idea of ‘family’ has been criticised for being ‘heteronormative’ (taking heterosexuality as the norm) and denying other relationship statuses (e.g. singleness) (Hochschild 2003; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003; Smart 2007).

The relationship between religion and intimate life in the UK has undergone significant change in recent years (Page and Shipley 2020; Woodhead 2013; Yip and Page 2013). Patterns of intimacy have altered considerably (e.g. increased cohabitation and children born outside of marriage; greater acceptance of queer individuals, including legalising same-sex marriage—see Weeks 2007, 2014). Meanwhile, religions are often seen as out of step with these liberalising trends and are often invoked as bearers of tradition on intimacy matters. Media reporting on homosexuality and abortion frequently mobilise conservative religious opinion in representing the counterpositions, cementing this connection with traditionalism.

This chapter will unpack these assumptions, covering two themes. The first theme will chart the changing contours of marriage and the continuing salience of marriage for heterosexuals. Whilst retaining virginity until marriage has salience within some religious traditions, it becomes an ever-distant goal and an expectation that many heterosexuals struggle to uphold. Meanwhile, getting married continues to be valorised and idealised, supported through both religious and secular mechanisms (Yip and Page 2014). The dream of the big white wedding still holds much salience for heterosexuals.

The second theme will focus on what implications this emphasis on marriage has for queer individuals, especially in the wake of new legislation enabling the recognition of same-sex partnerships. Despite the negative rhetoric emerging from religious spaces, some religious traditions have supported same-sex marriage and campaigned for it. Yet although this may be considered a positive development, some have criticised the way that same-sex marriage continues to support heteronormative forms of intimate life, with religious endorsement only enabling this (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003). At the same time, queer couples desiring a same-sex wedding
in a religious context in Britain may experience great difficulty, especially given the fact that the established Church of England is legally forbidden from performing the service.

Conceptualising ‘family’ and intimate life

The idea of the family as the lynchpin of society has deep roots and cross-cuts both religious and secular narratives (Thatcher 2015). Many religious contexts have often encouraged the promotion of marriage and procreation, alongside the curtailment and discouragement of divorce. Whilst religious narratives—particularly of the Abrahamic faith traditions—often prioritise the idea of the family as God-given, the notion of ‘the family’ has resonance in more secular spaces too. Strong families are associated with the robustness of the nation, typified by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party campaign of the late 1980s to return to ‘family values’, which was translated to mean that children should only be born within heterosexual marriage. This family values campaign was rooted in concerns regarding the increasing numbers of teenage pregnancies, absent fathers and assumed welfare dependency (Forrest 2018). This moral conservatism continued into the 1990s under John Major’s Back to Basics campaign, with the irony being that the government’s downfall was partially attributable to the sexual misdemeanours of cabinet officials (Weeks 2007). National identities are forged through how families are understood, and in the UK, this has been in terms of the heterosexual family. Indeed, the notion of the family has been traditionally understood in wholly positive terms, yet feminist critique has situated the family as a more problematic space, especially for women and children, and even a dangerous one (Rahman and Jackson 2010; Roseneil 2005; Smart 1992, 2007). In religious contexts where the family is valorised in sacred terms, this can lead to perilous situations such as cases where religious leaders encourage wives to remain in abusive marriages (Nason-Clark et al. 2018). The concept of the family invokes certain dominant ideas, rooted in heterosexual marriage and the bearing of children within that marriage. Whilst lives have always been far messier than this and have never neatly followed this normative model, it is this formulation of the nuclear family that has been idealised (Smart 2007; Weeks 2014). Heterosexuality therefore comes to be authorised and emphasised, as the normative means through which intimate life is structured and upon which all other elements of life correspond. In other words, social life is defined through the lens of heteronormativity, which Richardson describes as

the process whereby the normative status of heterosexuality is institutionalized and legitimated through social institutions and cultural norms and practices that naturalize and privilege particular forms of (gendered) heterosexuality as normative ways of living as well as normative sexuality . . . The analytic focus, in other words, is how the heteronormative ordering of the social is (re)produced through everyday practices, norms, subjectivities, identities, bodies and relationships . . . heteronormativity regulates the lives of heterosexual as well as non-heterosexual identified people.

(2018: 16)

The sweeping changes to family life, partly initiated through the legislative reforms of the 1960s, has led to some envisaging ‘the family’ in a much broader sense, to be inclusive of same-sex couples and single parents and invoking friendship networks as family (Plummer 2003). For example, Morgan (2011) sees the family in performative terms; families do not just ‘exist’ but are created and consolidated, a process which he terms ‘family practices’. Meanwhile, others have argued that because of the historical baggage attached to the term, the notion of the family has outlived its usefulness and needs to be ‘decentred’ (Roseneil 2005: 241). In this view,
the current diversity captured in relationship formations cannot be contained under the term ‘family’, as this remains an exclusionary concept, which remains formulated on heteronormative lines:

The concept of a family, which suggests clear boundaries—family members inside, others outside—is less and less useful for understanding how people live their personal relationships and whom it is who matters to them.

(Roseneil 2005: 251)

In other words, being inclusive of queer individuals does not inevitably mean that heteronormativity is dismantled; rather, it can take new forms. Smart (2007) argues that the term ‘personal life’ is more encompassing, unseating the dominance of biological forms of connectivity and giving equal weight to friendships, for example. It also overcomes the dominant association of ‘family’ with the private sphere, given that personal life is lived in various spheres of life. Smart also places much emphasis on the emotional connections we forge as we build our relational lives, also recognising that the affective dimensions of life will not necessarily follow preordained patterns pertaining to the biological family. Therefore, a critical engagement with the term ‘family’ and utilising a more encompassing term such as personal life, or intimate life (with the latter term also pertaining more closely to sexuality as lived), can refocus attention to a broader range of life practices.

**Intimate life: changing patterns**

Until very recently, dominant religious narratives promoting the heterosexual family (particularly of the Christian variety) cohered with more secular-derived narratives. Since the Victorian era, heterosexual marriage was seen as the marker of respectability, supported through the Church. Respectability was forged on classed, raced and gendered terms. Working-class homes were scrutinised and denigrated, with middle-class Christian evangelists believing it to be their duty to minister to them; the orderly middle-class home governed by the elevation of the family to esteemed status was seen as a protector against poverty and loose morals, with women’s unpaid devotion to the home underpinning this ideology (Weeks 2014). Women therefore came to be responsible for the respectability of their whole family, with this respectability partially dependent on their Christian identity, which contributed to the construction of dominant forms of femininity based on purity (Brown 2001). Meanwhile, these idealised forms of family life were also projected as part of colonialist and imperialist endeavours; empire was forged through the idealisation of the white middle-class family, invoking racist hierarchies in the process (McClintock 1995). Religious discourses—particularly of an Evangelical nature—were entwined with broader state-sanctioned and cultural discourses regarding sexuality, so that religious teachings broadly complemented the status quo. For example, the grave anxieties induced over male masturbation in the late 19th and the early 20th century could utilise references to Onan’s spilling of seed in the book of Genesis, assumed by some to denote the biblical prohibition of masturbation (Morgan 2013; Perry 2019; Regnerus 2007; Weeks 2014). Meanwhile, the construction of the welfare state in the post-war years was hinged on supporting a particular familial morality, consolidated through marriage, views which the Church strongly supported (Weeks 2014).

However, intimate life has altered dramatically over the last 50 years (Jackson and Scott 2004; Plummer 2003). This was precipitated by the radical changes of the 1960s, where individual decision-making on morality became more pronounced. In England and Wales, this was
facilitated through legislative changes around such issues as divorce, abortion and the partial decriminalisation of same-sex activities. Whilst religious discourses are often understood as fundamentally conservative on such issues, the reality was far more complex, as Christian churches in England and Wales often constituted part of the official debate at the time and could take a relatively liberal line. The Anglican Church’s role was particularly influential, given the fact that their bishops sat in the House of Lords (McLeod 2007). The Anglican Church’s Lambeth Conference of 1958 affirmed the use of contraceptives within marriage, thereby taking a much more positive line than they had when they had grudgingly accepted contraception in their conference of 1930 (Weeks 2014). Meanwhile, Anglican clergy were active in their attempts to decriminalise homosexuality. Clergy were invited to contribute to the theologian Derrick Sherwin Bailey’s report on homosexuality, who went on to speak to the Wolfenden Committee of 1956, and although the report upheld the view that homosexuality was unnatural, it did strongly advocate for decriminalisation (Jordan 2011; McLeod 2007). In relation to abortion, too, Protestant churches in England and Wales were largely in support of offering a legal measure to enable abortion, due to the numbers of women who died or were injured through back-street abortions, although the Catholic Church remained staunchly opposed (McLeod 2007).

By the 1980s, greater anxieties arose regarding the impact of these earlier reforms; higher divorce rates, the rise in single parenthood and the public display of same-sex relationships all stoked social anxieties. Whilst there was much disquiet over teenage mothers and the impact of mothers working (the idea of the ‘latchkey kid’ entered common parlance), one key piece of legislation responding to these fermenting anxieties was Section 28 where local authorities, and the schools under their care, could not promote homosexuality and what Margaret Thatcher called ‘pretend family relationships’ (Weeks 2014). At the heart of these debates was a concern that ‘family life’ was under threat; the notion of ‘family values’ came to have strong purchase and was promoted by UK and US governments concurrently (Roseneil 2005). Again, the churches played a complicated role, with the Anglican Church perceived as a thorn in the side of Thatcher’s Conservative government, particularly in the wake of the 1985 Faith in the City report, which held the government to account for growing levels of poverty. At the same time, sexual morality came to be a key definer of conservative religious formations; conservative religious traditions started to expand and flourish as some individuals embraced the traditional values they espoused (Woodhead 2007). Conservative factions of the Church of England started to voice their opposition to homosexuality, an issue that would come to create a fundamental crisis within the Church in the coming decades, which threatened to split the Church in two (Brown and Woodhead 2016; McKinnon and Trzebiatowska 2011; Weeks 2014). Those conservative formulations of religion corresponded with the broader cultural campaign of the Thatcherite government to instil ‘Victorian values’, invoking a golden age where stricter moral codes were followed; in essence, a return to a ‘golden age’ that never was (Weeks 2014).

Meanwhile, immigration had steadily increased, particularly since the 1960s, bringing into greater focus other religious traditions such as Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism. Managing the racism and hostility meted out by wider society was often mediated through a strong focus on family support and mutual interdependence. This meant that close kinship ties, both within family groups and across families, became of heightened importance (Baumann 1996; Bluck et al. 2012; Yip 2004). Whilst on the one hand this afforded many protections, as one’s immediate family and broader community network could provide much support, this also generated kin-based obligations, with expectations to fulfil certain roles and duties. The strength of the community became connected to the durability and stability offered through the family network, emphasising certain gendered and sexuality obligations, such as heterosexual marriage, reinforced through religious means (Yip 2004). Therefore, many minority religious
traditions supported the focus on heterosexual marriage, thereby complementing the heteronormative emphasis that had formed the basis of much of Christianity in the UK. Given the intense debates that occurred over homosexuality at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, religion as a whole became associated with forms of oppression. As a new era of sexual equalities were forged from the 2000s, religion increasingly came to be understood in conservative terms and as curtailing the gains made by queer and feminist activists. Religion therefore came to be reinscribed with illiberalism and intolerance towards sexual and gender minorities.

In recent decades, greater equalities have been forged; there is greater acceptance of mothers in paid work, with improved legislation to enable parental leave, and better legislation protecting queer people from harassment and new legislation to firstly allow civil partnerships, followed by same-sex marriage (the first same-sex weddings started to take place in England, Scotland and Wales in 2014, with Northern Ireland following suit in 2020. However, Northern Ireland is not subject to the 2010 Equalities Act, leading to discrepancies with the rest of the UK regarding equalities pertaining to sexuality). In a lot of respects, things are much improved for accepting a wider range of intimate life arrangements. But heteronormative discourses persist. Motherhood continues to be heavily scrutinised and regulated, even as greater allowances are made for mothers to be in paid work (Page 2016). Queer bodies willing to comply with heterosexual arrangements such as subscribing to lifelong monogamous partnerships are typically rewarded, rather than those wishing to live out their lives in less normative ways (Richardson 2018). Some have argued that initiatives like same-sex marriage actually encode certain ‘respectable’ relationship formations, so that queer bodies are expected to follow a particular heterosexual script (Jackson and Scott 2004). In this understanding, same-sex marriage comes to buttress heteronormative formations, rather than act as a challenge to them. At the same time, because of the saliency and sacred endorsement of marriage in many religious traditions, many queer religious individuals welcome the opportunity to be able to participate in a rite they deem highly significant (Gahan 2016).

In other words, the normative boundaries have been redrawn somewhat, but boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable intimate life behaviour continue to persist (Page and Shipley 2020). Despite the legislation enabling same-sex marriage, the Church of England is legally barred from offering them, with a potential prison term for priests who do not comply. Given the Church’s status as the established church, this further entrenches the idea that religions are opposed to sexuality equality and also means that queer-identifying religious individuals have few options for having a religiously endorsed wedding—for heterosexual couples in England who are not divorced, marriage within the Church is a right, as it is residency, rather than one’s religious belief, determining access. Yet this is an opportunity same-sex couples cannot take advantage of. Meanwhile, provision within other spaces for religiously based wedding services for same-sex couples is minimal (Johnson et al. 2017). Some religious traditions have campaigned vigorously for same-sex marriage, this aligning with a particular ethical sensibility where monogamous and ‘committed’ relationships are promoted. But whilst certain religious traditions may endorse same-sex marriage, it does not correspondingly mean that there is a place of worship within close proximity available for the service; indeed, a place of worship may perform same-sex weddings but disallow the wedding on the grounds that the couple are not part of that particular religious community (Johnson et al. 2017). This means that same-sex marriage becomes a secular, rather than a religious, reality. At the same time, queer religious young people often envisage that same-sex marriage will at some point become a possibility for them (Gahan 2016).

How do religious young adults living in the UK make sense of these broader changes in relation to their own religious lives? Drawing on data from the Religion, Youth and Sexuality
Religion and intimate life

For centuries, the Church has played a key role in the legitimisation of heterosexual marriage. This was consolidated through the Marriage Act of 1753, which gave a new focus to the church wedding as a marker of marriage, as opposed to verbal agreements. The church became the focal point for the authorisation of marriage, with marriage itself being understood as codifying respectability (Weeks 2014). Marriage itself has continued to be constituted through heterosexuality, especially its assumed reproductive potential, and valorised in church wedding services where reference is made to the expectation that children will be the fruit of the marriage (couples who challenge such blessings and ask for them to be removed—e.g. because they do not want to have children—face enormous challenges—see Llewellyn 2016). Whilst the expectation for virginity until marriage has waned considerably, with those continuing to support this often being religiously motivated, there is still strong cultural support for marriage itself, epitomised through the high purchase placed on the white wedding and recent campaigns to allow same-sex marriage.

Heterosexual young adults who identify religiously often find any religious edicts to only have sex within marriage very difficult to achieve (Yip and Page 2013). For example, Imtoual and Hussein (2009) highlight the challenges when the dominant religious discourse within Islam promotes sex within marriage only, and the challenges this causes in reality, especially given the later age of marriage and rising divorce rates. They emphasise the gendered nature of this, with women facing far more repercussions for sex outside of marriage than men do. But even for women who try their best to follow a celibate pathway, this is a double-edged sword, given the way that sex within marriage is valorised—to be celibate and single is deemed a ‘second-class’ pathway. Not all religious traditions emphasise sex-within-marriage only. Some are more accepting of couples cohabitating, such as liberal forms of Christianity, whilst some religious traditions do not put much emphasis on virginity, such as Buddhism (Page and Yip 2017a). For many Buddhists living in the West, a key concern is not the type of sex one is having or whether that is in a married or unmarried context, but whether that sex follows strong ethical principles of avoidance of harm and not facilitating sexual misconduct.

Whilst heterosexuals do experience tensions regarding expectation and reality around sex before marriage, marriage itself continues to be valorised, with this being supported in broader cultural norms. Whilst some would respond with incredulity regarding a religious young adult’s commitment to be a virgin until marriage, little reaction would be given to the idea of getting married, even at the same time as rates of marriage are in decline. Paradoxically, weddings themselves continue to be emphasised within broader culture (Cokely 2005; Ingraham 1999). Whilst marriage has been constituted as a religious ideal, with many religious traditions
supporting sexual activity only within the context of marriage, marriage is still aspirational in broader culture, even if there is far less emphasis on the need for virginity until marriage (Lyon and Crow 2012; Thomson and Holland 2002). Young people in the RYS project grappled with these normatives.

A key emblem of marriage was the wedding itself, and usually, this was underscored by religious ritual endorsement. Layla, a Muslim woman, emphasised the two-stage wedding process that occurred for her sister:

[T]he imam . . . comes and he recites a verse from the Qur’an regarding marriage and stuff . . . and then he asked my sister if you guys are agreed and she will be like ‘Yes, I agree’ . . . So that was the basic marriage stuff and it can be as cheap as just buying a few drinks and it can also be as elaborate as you want it, so that is because Islam is really, really happy [regarding the] marriage institution . . . if God has given you the ability to reach a certain age and you know you’ve found the girl you want, you shouldn’t let finances be the objection to having a marriage because that even makes you go boasting because obviously if you keep seeing each other for a long time and you love each other, the sex becomes even more, you know, staring at you in your face, so why not just get the marriage done, God [will] be happy with you and you [will] not [be] breaking any rules, you know.

Layla understood marriage as something that should come earlier rather than later, to avoid any sexual temptations. The religious endorsement was pivotal to this, and Layla was not alone in highlighting the role that religion played in affirming marriage. Tahseen, a Muslim woman, emphasised in her video diary that it was the religious dimension to the wedding that was significant, and she had tired of wedding celebrations that she perceived had become what she deemed un-Islamic:

With the whole summer season coming along and the whole wedding business I can’t be bothered with that really to be honest because I mean, there is a difference between an Islamic wedding and a cultural wedding . . . people are dressing somewhat extravagantly just to show off their bodies.

Religion, however, was not the only lens through which approaches to marriage were formulated, and participants drew on other resources. Romantic ideals were also referenced, with Parminder, a Sikh woman, discussing the prominence of weddings in her life, saying, ‘I think every little girl dreams of their wedding when they are younger’. Weddings themselves—the ritual enactment of a marriage—were frequently referenced by participants, in patterning their lives, acting as a constant reminder of the heterosexual imperative. Jenny, a Christian woman who was in a relationship, felt the pressure from her contemporaries, and said, ‘Our friends . . . are anxious for another wedding’. In some respects, this referenced a preoccupation within broader, more secular culture. Ingraham (1999) highlights that weddings are big business, inflation-proof, reinforced through cultural elements in books and film. Indeed, the consumer-oriented focus was something recognised by our participants:

Asians tend to know each other in their community. It builds up that pressure. [Where I live] there’s a small community. Everyone knows everyone. And it’s that pressure of having your child’s wedding better than your friends. So be that hotels, now people
have started to hire land and do a marquee. The bride and groom arrive in helicopters and it can be a challenge for some families to get their children married off.

(Ajeet, Sikh man)

[I]t’s escalated to such an extent that parents are spending sort of their whole life savings on one day, and that’s what is really concerning, so you’ve got people that, working class people, either worked in factories their whole lives or work in relatively low paid jobs, but have saved and saved and saved for their children to have a wedding day that’s memorable. But also it’s an issue of perceptions of others in the community and the need and the desire to be able to show off essentially, to be able to say we’ve put on a good day, and yeah, you want to be able to look after your guests, to cater for them, but you know, when you’re talking about someone that lives in a terraced house who’s you know probably driving a Ford Mondeo, putting on a hall with a chocolate fountain and ice sculptures and you’re just thinking, what a waste of money.

(Surjit, Sikh woman)

Uma, a Sikh woman, would recognise Surjit’s narrative, noting that her mother’s job facilitated saving up for her wedding, saying, ‘my mum is like a factory worker but she saves; they don’t spend, so they’ve saved so much ... they just save for those weddings and they save like thousands and thousands of pounds’. On the one hand, these experiences of the vast sums spent on weddings link up with a consumerist orientation, infusing romance culture with cash spending—a pattern that can easily be located in non-religious contexts. But on the other hand, there was often something more going on here than mere consumption. Surjit emphasised that the wedding itself was referenced in relation to the religious community, and it was important for families to communicate their hospitality and resources to the wider community setting. Therefore, these were key moments at which religion itself was solidified and remembered, especially relevant for individuals who only attended places of worship for such big occasions. These acted as an affirmation of faith identity and religious community belonging, as well as an affirmation of values often held strongly by religious communities, such as heterosexuality, marriage and envisaged parenthood. Indeed, participants stressed the important role weddings played for their families. Shalini, a Hindu woman, explained:

I really want a small wedding and [my mum would] prefer me to get married in India ... so I can have an elephant and whatever, ok, not an elephant, but you know what I mean! Have a proper, like, you know, massive wedding.

The scale of the wedding Shalini’s mother envisaged was reasoned through a notion of doing it ‘properly’. This is not necessarily just about demarcating one’s status in the social hierarchy, around what one can afford to spend. This sense of scale can also be linked to a need to categorically state that their daughter has made the transition to heterosexual adulthood in the most approved way, which reflects not just on Shalini herself, but also on the successes of her parents. This sense of using the wedding as a marker of respectability and as an emblem of heterosexuality was all the more pertinent as Shalini’s parents had actually separated, fuelling rumour and gossip within their religious community. By utilising Shalini’s own successful negotiation of marriage, this could be shored up as positive evidence of the respectability of Shalini’s wider family in the eyes of the broader religious community.
At the same time, participants, particularly women participants, were keenly aware that this sense of happiness associated with a wedding could be tinged with sadness too, as Parminder, a Sikh woman, explains:

[T]hey say especially like Indian weddings like the happiest day of your life but also the like the saddest day in your life because there is a ritual at the end of the day where the groom will come to the bride’s house and pick up the bride after the wedding day . . . so it’s very much like we’re handing our daughter over to your family now, so she’s your family’s, she will carry your family’s honour, carry your family’s name, you will be known as such and such’s daughter now.

The demands of heterosexuality weigh heavily, as weddings re-demarcate people’s place in the social system, with the burden usually falling on women to make significant life-changes (e.g. the prevailing custom in the UK of women adopting their husband’s last name on marriage). Therefore, the enormity of these demands (and gender imbalances) are cushioned by, and eclipsed by, the event itself. With all the focus on outfits and food and music, there is less time to reflect on the wider symbolism occurring and the greater life events that individuals are participating in.

Many religious traditions privilege heterosexual marriage as the most acceptable path to respectable adulthood, but weddings themselves were often also endorsed through patterns of consumerism. Whatever sums are spent, weddings were key moments where heterosexuality was affirmed and celebrated, and these events were often linked to broader rites and rituals, often using religion as a resource in cementing these rites. Weddings acted as visible displays of heterosexuality, supporting the status quo and offering the promise of future children. For many, marriage was the bringing together of formalised sexual awakening and a consolidation of religious commitments, as couples were welcomed into the religious community as a new family unit, and the wedding itself was a pivotal site for this celebration.

**Same-sex partnerships: potentiality and constraint**

For queer participants, there are far more contestations regarding the extent to which they are accepted in religious spaces. Given the propensity within many religious traditions to endorse heterosexual marriage, the idea of being able to participate in a religiously endorsed wedding was a pipedream. Instead, queer participants were more likely to be battling more immediate inclusion concerns. Stephen was a gay Christian and a regular churchgoer but was frustrated how same-sex relationships were discussed in sermons, often being associated with particular sexual acts rather than focused on relationships:

[The sermon] wasn’t hell, fire and brimstone, it was a very compassionate response, but it’s the best you can expect from him . . . For me, it’s about love, that’s what it boils down to . . . a relationship isn’t just about sex, it’s about much more than that, it’s about relationship, I mean a relationship isn’t just based on what do you do in bed, it’s about, well, do you make them a cup of tea in the mornings.

The inability of Stephen’s church to even consider the broader relational dynamics of same-sex relationships, instead solely viewing them through the lens of sexual acts, limited their capacity to respond positively to the formal endorsement of same-sex partnerships, to the extent that a petition had been circulated in his church, citing that civil partnerships were wrong. Even the
acknowledgement of his own relationship would cause a problem for Stephen in his church, never mind getting his relationship formally acknowledged in this religious setting. In spite of the negative reaction of his church, Stephen did imagine what it would be like to be able to get married in a religious setting, and the religious importance of this:

I do think there is something special and there is something about getting a union recognised before God. . . . [My friends] a gay couple [are] having their civil partnership, and then they’re going round to somebody else who is an ordained priest who is going to bless their union5 . . . within the church it’s about making your promises before God. This couple are going to exchange vows and they’re going to exchange vows before God . . . there’s something powerful about [that] . . . there’s this divine bit which stands outside of any form of social construct where for me it’s between two people, two people who love one another and that for me is extraordinary, two people who out of all the world and out of all the situations when they might have met, might not have met, have managed to meet, fallen in love, and decided to pledge themselves to one another in complete fidelity, and out of love, that’s extraordinary and I think whether it’s between people of indeterminate genders, people of the same gender, or opposite gender, that is something to be treasured and to be celebrated.

Stephen therefore emphasises the religious God-given importance of having same-sex relationships formally recognised, and the challenging mechanisms through which his friends had had to navigate, in order for their relationship to be blessed by a priest, given this went against Church of England guidelines. Although it was not possible to have the actual ceremony in an Anglican church (as previously mentioned, it is currently illegal for Church of England priests in England and Wales to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies, and priests in England are also barred from performing blessings); a priest was willing to break the rules to make this a sacred moment, where God was included. For other participants, however, the idea of a same-sex partnership being religiously recognised in any guise was out of the question.

Jamil was a deeply religious Muslim, who reflected greatly on the theology of his religious tradition, reading religious texts such as the Qur’an in the original Arabic, as he expressed concern that in translating the Qur’an to English, key meanings were lost. He was currently in a secret relationship with another man. He anticipated the opprobrium he would receive were he to disclose his sexuality to his family and religious community; his partner had been beaten up and thrown out of the family home for being gay. Jamil saw no theological conflict between being bisexual and Muslim, and challenged those who insisted the Qur’an prohibited same-sex relationships by asking them whether they had even read the text properly. Jamil argued that ‘my connection is between me and Allah’, thereby forging a strong religious connection that overrode broader religious interpretations, with only Allah being in a position to judge him. Despite his affirmation of the compatibility of his sexual and religious identities, same-sex marriage became a sticking point, saying, ‘I know that we can never get married; there’s no imam [who] would marry us, and I would never get married [in a] registry office because that’s not seen as a marriage in the eyes of Allah’. Jamil was therefore in a double bind: in order to benefit from a religiously ordained wedding, this had to be performed by an imam, but because he saw it very unlikely that an imam would perform this role, a religious wedding was therefore denied him. Indeed, given that he felt unable to publicly disclose his current relationship, even the acknowledgement of his existing partnership was off-limits, with the future looking very uncertain for him.
Meanwhile, as a Liberal Jew, Jacob had a rather different experience. His religious tradition had created a same-sex commitment ceremony liturgy, and at the time of our interview, leaders in his religious tradition were actively campaigning to allow for civil partnerships to be conducted in places of worship. When Jacob was interviewed, only the blessing, rather than the ceremony itself, could be conducted in his synagogue. Jacob was therefore part of a tradition which not only endorsed same-sex relationships, but also were willing to actively campaign for the rights of same-sex couples within their religious tradition, which gave Jacob a rather different and affirming environment, compared with Jamil and Stephen. For Jacob, partnerships were about ‘how people have obligations and duties to each other’, with the aim of such partnerships being long lasting and ‘forever’. The validation of a same-sex relationship by his religious community was not in question; it was assumed and normalised. Whereas Stephen and Jamil struggled to envision the possibility for a religiously endorsed same-sex wedding, for Jacob, this was far more assured. However, he encountered other dilemmas, especially in a context where having children within partnered relationships was still revered:

I think I would like children . . . but I think it is a very difficult decision at the moment . . . would [I] adopt a child if I was in a gay relationship, basically because of the societal stigma against that child and I don’t think that I should live out my liberal, you know, beliefs through my children . . . children aren’t projects to be played around with and I know that you’re never going to change society unless you do something about it but I think that is very easy to say but then when . . . you are in the playground where your child is bullied and beaten up because they’ve got two dads. I think that brings them to stark relief that it’s very difficult.

Jacob envisaged future parenthood but felt constrained by the perceived social reactions his future child would face with having two fathers. Here, opprobrium is not imagined as emanating from any religious space; his Liberal Jewish synagogue is instead understood as fully supportive. Instead, he imagines that censure would ensue from the school playground and the ‘secular’ educational setting. Despite the legal constraints of Section 28 being overturned and the embracing of new equalities for queer individuals, Jacob still envisaged hostility, which therefore made him question whether he could justify having children at all.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the relationship between religion and intimate life in the UK, focusing in particular on the issue of marriage. Despite many changes in how intimate life is practised, marriage continues to hold salience, even if support for virginity until marriage remains relevant mainly only in conservative religious contexts. Marriage is differently navigated by heterosexual and queer individuals in religious contexts. Heterosexuals typically understand marriage as a marker of adulthood that is expected of them from their families and religious communities, with much pressure placed on young adults to get married. Whilst some heterosexuals were able to draw on the notion of the big wedding to buy into a positive endorsement of married life, others were far more ambivalent, particularly regarding the gendered constraints that they anticipated. Whilst some used the fantasy wedding as a means of ameliorating any negative connotations, others were far more critical regarding the expectation to get married (see also Page and Yip 2019). Meanwhile, queer religious individuals often have to fight very hard for queer inclusion, especially given that provision for same-sex marriage in religious contexts is minimal. Whilst heterosexuals often discussed marriage in terms of the wedding itself and the
form it would take (often masking the gendered inequalities embedded in the process), queer young people were imagining whether religiously endorsed same-sex commitment ceremonies were even possible, bar a few exceptions where individuals were situated in queer-affirming religious traditions.

Queer individuals are severely curtailed, not just by religious normatives but by secular ones too. Whilst the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act enabled places like Liberal Jewish synagogues to be allowed to conduct same-sex wedding services, it does not mean that access is straightforward, as couples may need to prove their religious commitment or explicitly be part of the religious congregation where they wish to get married. Meanwhile, the established church is disbarred from conducting same-sex marriages in England and Wales, but this creates huge contextual discrepancies. An Anglican desiring a same-sex wedding living in England is not allowed to be married in an Anglican Church, but if they live in Scotland, this is a possibility. Meanwhile, some participants in the RYS project pointed to other exclusionary mechanisms outside of their religious tradition which curtailed their intimate life choices, such as the imagined censure their child would receive in the playground if they had two mums or two dads. Queer participants in the RYS project wanted to be conventional, have weddings and have children. This may be deemed a reiteration of heteronormativity, and marriage setting the scene for the ‘straight time’ account (Boellstorff 2007). But for many, the idea of marriage as a sacred obligation runs deep and is seen as endorsed by God. Smart (2007) details that there are three key reasons why same-sex couples seek out a formal partnership. Firstly, the idea of love as transformative, with a formal ceremony marking the movement from one stage of life to another; secondly, love as relational and a long-established commitment—many same-sex couples seeking out a formal partnership had been together for a very long time; and thirdly, the idea that a formal commitment cemented and anchored the relationship. But whilst all of these factors were important to queer religious individuals, an additional issue crucial to them was the religious meanings generated and the injustice felt when places of worship did not allow this.

This chapter has considered intimate life and religion. Religious individuals are living diverse sexual lives, but often a dominant script of heteronormativity prevails. The significance of this chapter is its inclusion beyond Christianity. Whilst the normative surrounding marriage has historically been promoted through a Christian lens, greater religious diversity in the UK means that this is navigated in new ways. The experience of the normatives around intimate life are highly contextual, both across religious traditions and within them.

Notes
1 Patterns in the UK broadly follow changes occurring across Northern Europe, North America and Australasia, but how change is configured contextually differs and will depend on the issue in hand (Green 2010; Page and Shipley 2020). For example, regarding queer rights, the UK context has been significantly influenced by the European Union’s equalities (e.g. the Charter of Fundamental Rights which was agreed in 2000). But whilst some members of the EU have endorsed sexual orientation protections, other states have explicitly resisted this. For example, Romania does not allow same-sex marriage, with a concerted attempt to stop this becoming a future possibility (Mutler 2019; Turcescu and Stan 2005). Meanwhile, some countries around the world still retain a death penalty for same-sex activity, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, and many others have considerable punishments for same-sex activity (Mendos 2019; Ndijo 2013; Van Klinken and Chitando 2016; Van Klinken and Obadere 2019). Meanwhile whilst in contexts like the UK, levels of stigma for having a child outside of marriage have considerably decreased, in other parts of the world this remains a highly stigmatising issue, for example Nigeria (see Amakor 2020). There are also local differences. For example, cohabitation may be broadly accepted but with some exception, such as conservative religious groups. Woodhead
Sarah-Jane Page

(2013) argues that 8.5% of the UK’s religious landscape constitutes what she calls a moral minority—a group highly conservative regarding morality issues, and therefore out of step with broader public opinion.

2 England and Wales passed legislation to allow same-sex marriage in 2013. Scotland did so in 2014. Northern Ireland remained an outlier until 2019, when Westminster enacted secondary legislation to enable the provision of same-sex marriage, given that the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended.

3 The latchkey kid was one who had their own key to access their home after school and would therefore not have adult supervision until a parent or guardian returned from paid work.

4 This project, conducted between 2009 and 2011, was jointly funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council under the Religion and Society Programme (Award no. AH/G014051/1). The research team consisted of Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip (Principal Investigator), Michael Keenan (Co-investigator) and Sarah-Jane Page (Research Fellow). The project, involving 693 participants (aged between 18 and 25) of diverse religious backgrounds and various sexualities, focused on the participants’ management of their religious, sexual, youth and gender identities in different everyday contexts. The participants were recruited through a host of sampling strategies, including publicity postcards/posters/emails to relevant groups, social media, snowball sampling, personal networks and the project website. An overview of the project’s methodological approach, and details of the three methods utilised—online questionnaire, interview guide and video diary guide—can be found in Yip and Page (2013).

5 At the time of the research (2009–2011), same-sex marriage was not a legal possibility, but civil partnerships were. At the time of Stephen’s interview, some Anglican priests would offer blessings following a civil partnership, though these were not officially endorsed by the Church. Indeed, not only were priests not allowed to perform the ceremony itself, a 2005 pastoral statement from the House of Bishops (reaffirmed in 2019) started categorically that priests should not offer a service of blessing to those who had entered a civil partnership (House of Bishops 2005, 2019). Meanwhile in September 2021, the Anglican Church in Wales voted to allow the blessing of same-sex couples, though they are still not permitted to perform marriages (BBC 2021).

References


Religion and intimate life


