

We want exemption on gay marriage too: Angry Muslims demand government treats them the same as Church of England

By Tamara Cohen

Muslim leaders yesterday criticised controversial plans to allow gay marriages – and demanded they should have the same legal exemption as the Church of England. The Muslim Council of Britain, which represents 500 mosques and community organisations, claimed the law was ‘utterly discriminatory’ and said they were ‘appalled’ by it. Farooq Murad, secretary general of the MCB, said his organisation had also ‘explicitly’ stated its strong opposition to the proposals, and he was seeking an urgent meeting with Culture Secretary Maria Miller to discuss amending it.

‘Appalled’: Farooq Murad, pictured, said ‘no one in their right mind should accept such a discriminatory law exempting only the Church of England Church in Wales from conducting gay marriages

The legislation, announced by Mrs Miller last week, would allow same-sex couples to marry as early as 2014.

However, she made it expressly illegal for the Church of England and the Church in Wales to conduct same-sex weddings.

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Mrs Miller added that any religious group was allowed to ‘opt in’ and perform ceremonies if they wish. She made the unexpected exemption for the Church saying it was a ‘special case’ because it has its own laws, the Canon laws, which compel vicars to marry any couples who live in the parish, regardless of denomination.

‘The gays I know are all fed up with the same-sex marriage debate’ writes Rachel Johnson.

The compromise left both sides unhappy, with traditionalists saying it undermined marriage and human rights campaigners saying it could be open to legal challenge. Gay marriage has been fast-tracked by David Cameron despite strong opposition within his party and from some religious groups.

David Cameron has promised to pass laws next year which would legalise gay marriage

Mr Murad said: ‘We find it incredible that while introducing the Bill in the House, Mrs Miller could keep a straight face when offering exemption for the established Church while in the same breath claiming “fairness to be at the heart” of her proposals.

‘The Muslim Council of Britain along with most other faith groups also made equally strong representation. ‘No one in their right mind should accept such a discriminatory law.

‘It should be amended to give exactly the same exemption to all the religions.’

There was further confusion over the plans yesterday as Mrs Miller wrote a blog on her department’s website claiming the Church of England was not banned from carrying out gay marriages and could opt in. Appearing to contradict her previous announcement, she wrote: ‘Are we “banning” the Church of England from holding same-sex weddings? No, of course not – they can opt in too.’ Her spokesman said yesterday that last week’s announcement was ‘poorly worded’ and that the Church of England and Church in Wales can opt in if they wish by changing Canon law. She added: ‘All religions who do not wish to carry out same-sex unions have the same protection, but the Churches must have it in law because of their legal obligation to marry couples.’ Ministers expect the legislation to take up to 12 months to get through Parliament.

Opponents of the plan for gay marriage argue the Prime Minister is ignoring public opinion and has no mandate for change

Tory MPs, including ministers, will get a free vote. Privately ministers believe at least 40 per cent of Tory MPs oppose the plans. In a surprise move, Labour has also granted its backbenchers a free vote.

Britain's first gay fathers hope to mount a legal challenge to the CoE's gay marriage ban. Millionaire couple Tony and Barrie Drewitt-Barlow, who have five children, are committed Christians in a civil partnership and want to get married at their local church in Danbury, Essex. They said the proposed changes would 'enshrine discrimination in law' against gay people