Building on the previous chapter’s focus on religious groups’ changing views on abortion, this chapter provides a detailed analysis of religious groups’ attitudes towards homosexuality and related equality issues. There are obvious reasons for looking at religious groups’ attitudes in this area across recent decades given that ‘traditionally, sexual relationships and family life are areas which have been closely policed by religious organisations and religious teaching’ (Francis et al. 2005: 45). Moreover, Hayes and Dowds’ observe that ‘… some commentators go so far as to suggest that public disputes and related court battles over homosexual rights have now replaced abortion as the most significant and divisive moral issue within many contemporary western industrialized societies’ (2013: 2). It is certainly the case that British society has seen major pieces of legislation enacted in recent years bringing greater social equality for same-sex individuals and relationships, which have often been opposed by religious traditions and organisations.

In Britain, homosexuality was decriminalised in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, coming a decade after the publication of the report of the 1957 Wolfenden Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, which articulated a ‘permissive principle’ towards private lives and personal morality (Thorup Larsen et al. 2012: 128). The Wolfenden Report ‘had won wide though by no means universal acquiescence among Christian leaders and Church assemblies’ (Machin 1998: 192), although, as Machin observes:

Such supporters of legalization, however, were by no means usually prepared to regard the homosexual orientation as equivalent to the heterosexual one. They were not, in many cases, prepared to abandon the traditional views that homosexuality was unnatural.
Consequently they did not as yet express an overt desire – such as has been expressed by some leading Christians since the 1970s – that homosexuals should enjoy the same freedom and rights as heterosexuals – for example, the right to live as a married couple after a church or civil wedding (1998: 192–3).

Several decades hence, the next legislative act on this subject was in a more restrictive direction, in the form of ‘Section 28’ from the 1988 Local Government Act, ‘one of the few victories for the morally restrictive part of the Conservative party under Thatcher’ (Thorup Larsen et al. 2012: 128). A series of major legislative advances for same-sex equality then followed under the Labour administrations in office from 1997–2010, including the repeal of ‘Section 28’. Given the changing social, political and legislative context surrounding homosexual behaviour and same-sex equality issues in post-war decades, this chapter assesses both changes in the attitudes of religious groups on both same-sex relations in general and specific equality issues.

The chapter is therefore structured into two main sections. The first section looks at the general acceptability of homosexuality and same-sex relationships over time, using data from recurrent social surveys, which have included questions on this topic since their inception. The second section focuses on particular same-sex equality issues, such as adoption and marriage rights, both of which have been the subject of major pieces of legislation under recent governments, Labour between 1997–2010 and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition since 2010. As with the previous chapter, evidence is sourced from separate recurrent social surveys, which offer different attitudinal indicators on this topic, in order to get as full a picture as possible of trends and patterns in attitudes amongst religious groups (for a fuller review of attitudinal trends in the general British population, see Clements and Field 2014). The analysis again builds on and contributes to the wider scholarly literature on public opinion towards homosexuality (Hayes 1995b; Evans 2002; Crockett and Voas 2003; Clements 2014b; Park and Rhead 2013; Heath et al. 2013a; Heath et al. 1993a), as well as denomination-specific studies of attitudes on this topic (Clements 2014e; Village and Francis 2008).

Attitudes towards homosexuality

This first section provides a detailed assessment of trends in general opinion on homosexuality, in terms of acceptance or approval across