

Equal Marriage Rights: What's God Got to Do with It?

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I was delighted to learn earlier this year, that the state to which I would be moving had passed legislation protecting people from discrimination based on their sexual orientation and legislation recognizing domestic partnerships for same-gender couples. I was delighted to learn that two members of this congregation, Gretchen Miller and Sarah Hendrickson, were poster girls for equal marriage in 2004, and married by your former minister, Rev. Carolyn Colbert.

While the fight may not be over, the recent failure of opposition to gather enough valid signatures to put legislation on the ballot does seem to indicate the tide is turning in public opinion. Still, there is a long way to go in this history-making movement for equal marriage rights, to give same same-sex marriages or unions the same rights as, in a phrase introduced to me by a gay activist and former debater, “mixed-sex marriages.”

“Mixed-sex marriages” – say that three times fast. Begins to sound like “missed-sex marriages,” or marriages in which sex is so rarely practiced, it is missed. Missed-sex marriages can be either same-sex or mixed-sex. But that’s a sermon for another day.

I am proud of our Unitarian Universalist religious association for helping to lead this movement to expand the institution of marriage beyond the confines of mixed-sex marriage, and to stand up for the civil liberties of GLBT people. From First Church Portland’s yellow-ribbon “hate-free” zone designation nearly twenty years ago, to the thousands of UUs marching in Boston just two years ago, we have been on the leading edge of what Coretta Scott King agreed is a great civil rights struggle of our day.

Back East, full marriage equality exists now in Massachusetts, and limited civil union rights have been granted in Vermont and Connecticut. Rhode Island activists have decided to settle for nothing short of full marriage equality, in the most Roman Catholic state in the union. Yet more and more states explicitly limit marriage to heterosexual couples, and the battle is often portrayed as God and moral values pitted against modern liberalism. When I attended a state legislative hearing in Hartford, Connecticut, seven years ago, supporters and opponents of civil union legislation lined up behind two different microphones: on the left side were the clergy and other religious people speaking against the legislation, and on the right side were the lawyers and gay and lesbian people speaking for it. The former said homosexuality was against God’s law; the latter said religion should stay out of this issue. Only one minister spoke in favor of the legislation, and nobody else in favor spoke from an explicitly religious perspective.

More liberal religious people are speaking up for marriage equality but still rarely from an unambiguously religious perspective. And why should we? This is, after all, a fight for civil marriage rights, not in any way an attempt to force religious leaders of whatever stripe to marry same-sex couples, against their beliefs. For this reason, I at first joined others in arguing that the sky won’t fall down if same-sex marriages are permitted, that the love in committed same-sex relationships is just as real and worthy as those in committed mixed-sex relationships, and

that my experience with UU congregations shows clearly that different sorts of couples can co-exist and even be friends, without one sort of relationship threatening another.

These are valid and decent arguments, sufficient for some. Most people's innate sense of fairness, combined with an awareness of particular gay, lesbian, or bisexual people in their lives, makes them receptive to this reasoning. Yet it seems that most Americans presently stop short of supporting *marriage equality*. Why? Because while they sense, accurately I believe, that marriage has a religious dimension, they misunderstand what it is about marriage that makes it religious. They have been convinced that religion and God are against same-sex marriage.

Thus most Americans, at least at this juncture, are conflicted: yes, gays and lesbians deserve some sorts of rights, but MARRIAGE? Can't do that. If God is seen as against it, no argument will convince them.

We might respond to this state of affairs with an elitist, judgmental position: calling those people stupid or mean-spirited and trying to pass equal marriage legislation any way we can. I submit that we would do better, politically and spiritually, to seek to understand people in this position and meet them where they are.

While we may disagree with them on many points, can we not understand their desire for our society to be governed by higher values, if not a higher power? Many intelligent, caring, even prophetic people – including Martin Luther King – have warned against our society's weak moral development compared with its robust scientific and economic growth. The dominant values of our society – individualism and consumerism – are leading us to a host of social problems and ecological devastation. Naturally, many people of conscience seek a moral order than can contain and direct this state of affairs.

Unfortunately, mainstream America sees only two choices: A godless secular culture in which “anything goes,” and a Bible-based culture, perhaps even a Bible-based government. And such a Bible-based society would be based on a particular interpretation of the Bible, de-emphasizing Jesus' radical message of inclusivity and social justice, while selectively emphasizing some of the purity codes of Leviticus.

The Religious Right has convinced much of America that it represents religion, and with religion, God and moral values. As long as religious people think that redefining marriage to include same-gender couples means turning your back on religion and God, they will not do it, no matter the arguments with which they are presented. One of Rhode Island's State Senators made this clear for himself at State Senate hearings at which I testified, saying: “You can make all of the arguments you want, you can call me a bigot, but this is sin, and I simply cannot support sin.”

When I heard the Senator say this, I paused: he represents many Americans in his thinking. It seems he has accepted the false dichotomy between the moral values of one branch of religion and total anarchy. And we liberal religious people have allowed this false dichotomy to grow because we have been too silent and too small to voice our own religious perspectives in the public square, on the commons.

This state of affairs brings to mind the words of Jonathan Swift:

We have just enough religion to make us hate

and not enough to make us love one another.

Narrow and intolerant religion may lead us to turn away from religion or at least seek its exclusion from public affairs. Whether or not this would be a positive change, it simply is not possible. I believe we need more religion of the sort that truly helps us see all of humanity and all of creation as one family. Ours is one of those religions. It's time to let our light shine!

Let us speak up, using language that others understand. In order to have an impact on our culture, we need to begin the conversation with common religious language when articulating our specific religious perspectives. When we do not, we allow the Religious Right to define the terms of the debate in such a way that allows many good, well-intended people to see no alternative between a narrow, judgmental sort of order and total chaos.

So I have begun to talk about God, publicly.

Some of you may squirm in your seats at the thought of my doing this. Some others of you may think, "Well, he's the minister, he's supposed to do that. But not me!" Some of you, I hope, will, after careful reflection, begin to speak about God not as if you knew everything, but as if you knew something – because you do. Consider how this current political issue relates to that which is sacred to you and to our faith. Practice articulating it. Dare to speak of your experience of the sacred, because each of us has a piece of the truth about God.

The UU minister Forest Church often says, "God is not God's name." That which is most worthy of our loyalty, that which resides at the heart of all things, that which moves us to love, to trust, to appreciate beauty, to heal suffering, to work for justice – that which makes a community of strangers and even one of enemies – the great mystery we seek to glimpse and touch here on Sunday mornings, this cannot be fully captured by any language, though our relationship with it grows as we attempt to name it. We may call it "Spirit of Life," "Higher Power," "Truth-Force," "Goddess," "Dependent Co-Arising," and a thousand other names, all metaphors.

Among those many names is "God" – a word which unfortunately has also taken on the specific meaning of an old, white, male bearded sky deity who creates, loves, judges, is obsessed with procreation, and occasionally throws thunderbolts and orders genocides. But the other meaning of God is alive in our society's soul as well – God as that measureless, infinite, mysterious, loving SOMETHING – presence, essence – the commanding reality of our lives. This is the Ultimate Reality which calls us – if we listen – to our best selves, the silent voice which moves us from selfishness to service, from hate to love, from bitterness to forgiveness, from mindless activity to solitude, from alienation to community.

We will find resonance with moderately conservative religious people when we speak of God in this way. At this time, most people do not recognize "Spirit of Life" or "The Ground of Being" as religious language worthy of their attention. But they do understand God as the source of Love. And they keep that understanding even if they simultaneously hold contradictory understandings of God as a being who cares more about your theology than your actions, and is willing to condemn people to a fiery place called Hell.

Good arguments can be made against using the word "God," rather than something which breaks open and expands divine metaphors, such as "Goddess." I believe in using multiple and varied names in our UU context, for many reasons. Yet I also believe it's important to meet

people where they are at: in this case, to speak to the moderate Christian's understanding of a God of Love. Once they let go of their contradictory and harmful notions of a wrathful, jealous, and murderous God, I might seek to challenge them further. But to start, I seek to express myself in ways that are comprehensible to my listener and true to me, even if inadequately so.

Unitarians and Universalists have been doing this for several centuries, asking "Is that what a Loving God would do? Burn babies in Hell because they weren't baptized?" Such interventions, made with love, may help people recognize their inconsistencies and perhaps even drop destructive theologies that do not square with their belief in a god of Love, a belief ultimately based less on the Bible than on their direct, personal experience of Love, felt to be divine.

With regards to marriage equality, I often use traditional religious language to articulate my particular liberal religious perspectives, saying something like this: "I hesitate to speak for God, for God is beyond any of us. But it seems to me that above all God is Love, and so when I see genuine Love being disrespected, I see God disrespected. Current marriage law disrespects genuine, committed love between adults. And so it disrespects God."

Few people, upon hearing this, immediately convert to Unitarian Universalism. But I observe that some at least give pause to this view, seeing it as a valid religious perspective. They may then realize that when the state does not grant equal marriage rights to gay and lesbian people, it is choosing the religious beliefs of some religions over others, not choosing "religious morality" over the secular "anything goes".

Religious beliefs held over a lifetime are not dropped easily, but some people may begin to quietly question themselves. I have seen this happen. If we don't back our listeners into a corner, they may give themselves room to doubt and weigh, to let go of any of their beliefs incongruent with an all-loving God who lives not just in a book but in this very moment: a God who lives in marriage, in community, in a conversation with a stranger. If we engage with them with compassion and honesty, and trust in the loving spirit that may arise in such encounters, both parties may have their hearts and minds newly opened. I hope you will consider this approach in your conversations with people with more traditional religious views.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a distinct religious perspective that allows us to describe in religious terms that which people generally sense in marriage but cannot name. Our perspective emerges from our understanding of religious authority. The Catholics locate authority in the hierarchy of the Church, beginning with the Pope, as Peter's spiritual descendent. Generally speaking, Protestants place religious authority to some degree in the individual conscience, but also in the Bible, though in practice what often carries authority is a specific preacher's interpretation of the Bible.

We place religious authority mainly in two places: the individual conscience, for freedom of belief, and in the gathered, covenanted community. We are people bound together neither by a creed nor a hierarchy, but by a promise to walk together in the ways of love, as best we can discern them, guided by sanctified reason as the lantern of our faith. Trusting that each of us has a piece of the truth, we try our best to discern the ways of love and to test those ways in our everyday lives. In traditional language, we trust that God emerges in such communities of covenant, wherein people not claiming to know all of the answers offer one another their fidelity, their faithfulness, in learning to lead lives of care and meaning. Our congregational life is sacred to us the way the Bible is sacred to some others. To quote Emerson, "God is, not *was*".

This theology undergirds all of who we are, including our Principles and Purposes. That which is holy may be found in many places, but in our religion we place greatest trust in the emergence of the sacred in covenantal relationship, freely entered by individuals.

Perhaps you can see where I am going with this: Marriage is the ultimate covenantal relationship. Couples who have been together a long time before marrying often think nothing will change, but it almost always does. As a minister, I experience no more holy moment than when I witness couples speaking their vows – which I have them write themselves – no more holy moment than when each of them says, “I do.”

Marriage is a means to a host of legal rights and responsibilities, to be sure; it is protection; it is stability for society. And it is also this: a sacred relationship into which people enter, not by subscribing to a creed, but by making promises to be faithful to one another in richer and in poorer, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad.

The reading maria shared earlier was taken from a wedding ceremony by my colleague, the Reverend Barbara Hamilton-Holway. It reminds us that marriage is even more than the joining of two lives: it is a spiritual opening for each.

*When you say to one another, “I love you,”
be able to say, “I love in you, everyone.
I love through you, the world.
I love life.
I love in you also myself.”
In loving one another, you make it possible to love more.
As you hold each other,
Know you are held in a larger embrace.
We are all connected
and your choice of commitment affects us all.
Your commitment strengthens our fidelity to one another,
for we depend on one another more than we know.
May your love for one another enlarge your embrace –
to love people,
the earth,
life,
and yourselves.
So much is possible.
May love, wherever it is found, be celebrated and recognized...¹*

We are a religious people who place our faith in that wonder-working spirit that arises in committed relationships of love and trust. We will not allow marriage to be reduced to less than its full, transformative, spiritual reality – and it is so reduced when marriage may be denied to couples of the same gender. Let us defend the sanctity of marriage by reminding society what makes it a holy rite of passage: not the gender of its participants, but that mysterious, courageous, and faith-filled yearning that leads a person to look their beloved in the eye and say, “I do.”

¹ from a collection of wedding readings by UU minister Rev. Edward Searl.

Blessed be and Amen.