

"Marriage: Sacred? Says who?" ... from page 9

who support full marriage equality for same-gender couples. Besides Kucinich and Sharpton, almost all of the other politicians like to pontificate on the "sacred and immutable institution of marriage." But what exactly does this mean? Does such an institution exist? Looking at the history of the institution(s) of marriage, it doesn't seem that way.

First, the "sacredness" of marriage has no singular meaning. To some religious communities and the politicians in them, sacredness implies that marriage is an institution set apart for a specific purpose by God. It is not only a special relationship between a man and a woman but between the couple and God and thus a "sacred" institution. But many other people of faith see marriage as a relationship between a couple and between the couple and God no matter what the genders of the partners involved.

For others still, "sacred" has more to do with the fact that they see marriage as a building block for society. Marriage (between a man and a woman) is sacred because without it, these people contest, all of society would be thrust into chaos. "Authentic" family bonds would not exist, children would be brought up in inadequate homes, and "values" (whatever the individual defines these to mean) are not passed on from generation to generation. Some even claim that recognizing same-gender marriage will be the destruction of humanity's relationship with God. I find it hard to see how basing public policy on such an assertion could be sound or fruitful.

Second, the immutability, or unchanging nature, of marriage is cited often as one reason that allowing same-gender marriage is a morally disastrous idea. U.S. Senate Majority Leader and Republican Bill Frist even has proposed that marriage has remained unchanged for at least "3000 years." The claim of immutability taps into a common human desire for stability and constancy. The familiar comforts us – and different-gender marriage is engrained deeply in the heterosexist fabric of our society.

But how sound are these claims of sacredness and immutability? Since individual states issue marriage licenses, should they base policy decisions on subjective notions of sacredness and the relation of an institution to God? Is marriage when facilitated by the

State a secular institution? Furthermore, is the immutability thesis a defensible one? Is marriage today really the same institution it was 3000 years ago? Or more precisely, is different-gender marriage – the "traditional" marriage between "one man and one woman" that we hear about all the time – really what marriage has always been in the U.S. or in other nations not so heavily effected by Christianity? Where do these claims of sacredness and immutability come from?

Religious Studies scholars and historians might point out that claims of sacredness and immutability of marriage are rooted in a fundamentalist Christian theology. While other Near-Eastern religious traditions, notably Islam and Judaism, often get wrapped up in similar fundamentalist defenses of different-gender marriage, these religious traditions do not have nearly the influence in the U.S. as the dominant fundamentalist Christian ideology. Fundamentalism is connected to, but should be differentiated from, a "literal interpretation" of the Christian Bible. Fundamentalists might interpret their sacred texts "literally" (or at least claim to) but more frequently they base their judgments on the authority of their pastors (local, national and worldwide) and their pastors' guidance on marriage. Taught to them since birth, heteronormative notions, proposing heterosexuality as the only good and authentic sexuality and the "norm" for human beings, also play a large role in their resistance to same-gender marriage.

However, it is very difficult, maybe even impossible, to ever render a "literal" interpretation of the Christian Bible or any other religious text. Interpretations of texts are necessarily subjective. While it might well be argued that the probability of one meaning of a text to the society that wrote it is more likely than another, coming up with the sacred and immutable thesis about marriage after doing one's best to render a "literal" interpretation of the Christian Bible is near impossible. Where persons like Sen. Frist come up with 3000 years as the age of marriage is certainly beyond me and beyond all credible Religious Studies scholars. The best guess is that he simply took 2000 years (back to the advent of Christianity) and added 1000 years for good measure – why not?

One could possibly do an exercise to illustrate what a "literal" rendering of the

"Biblical notion" of marriage would look like. Perhaps marriage should consist solely of a union between one man and one *or more* women – a notion illustrated (and seemingly advocated) by the author of Genesis 29:17-28 and II Samuel 3:2-5. Of course, this shouldn't impede a man's right to take concubines in addition to his wife or wives according to the authors of II Samuel 5:13, 1 Kings 11:3 and II Chronicles 11:21. Make sure though that your wife is a virgin before you marry her, because if you find out otherwise after the fact, it will be necessary to stone her to death if you follow Deuteronomy 22:13-21. Of course, marriage between a "believer and a non-believer" (whatever these terms mean) are forbidden in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. And what if a man dies and leaves his wife a widow? Then of course the brother of the deceased man must consummate a new marriage with her. If he does not wish to consummate a new marriage with the man's wife, she should take off his sandal and spit in his face (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). What do we do if the man wears no sandal? We are not told – and it remains a mystery to this day. If the immutability of marriage is based on the Christian Bible, we get nowhere fast. Indeed, marriage throughout the text changes – from polygamous to monogamous – and from indissoluble to dissoluble and back again. What the Christian Scripture's "literal" message is that the intimate and sexual relationships between human beings have are diverse and mutable - changing always and everywhere.

When proponents of "traditional marriage" talk about it, they are appealing to the Biblical texts and history in an isogetic fashion; that is, they are "reading into" the texts what they want to see there. But more often than not, these same people are really basing their notions about marriage on the views of their respective pastors and churches. The main issue is about reliance on authority, a lack of critical thinking and revisionist history. These pastors and churches might base their belief in marriage in part on their isogetic reading of sacred texts but they also heavily rely on a carefully crafted theology about marriage that is based on revisionist history, primitive and heterosexist notions of sexuality and the comfort of reliance on the

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