

# IS MARRIAGE A “MUST” OR A “BUST?” ENLARGING THE JUSTICE AGENDA

Blessing All Our Families  
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First things first, I want to offer a word of gratitude for the kind invitation to be with you at this conference and also a particular word of gratitude for our sponsoring organizations, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at PSR and No Longer Silent, Clergy for Justice of Phoenix. You're all wonderfully gifted troublemakers, and I applaud your courage and moral wisdom.

Let me also express my gratitude to all those who organized to defeat Proposition 107 on the November 2006 ballot. Your justice-making here has helped to encourage justice-making elsewhere and vice versa, I hope. While you were working to defeat Proposition 107, a coalition of Maine citizens, including many people of faith, helped to pass an amendment to the Maine State Human Rights Act to protect persons against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It was a sweet victory because we'd been struggling for 26 years to secure that legislation. Even sweeter, the final version of the bill includes protection on the basis of gender identity and expression, so we have much to celebrate.

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Jeffrey Dirrim, our conference organizer, asked me a while back to write a paragraph about why a conference on family diversity is important for people of faith. To give you the “big picture” of what I want you to hear in these remarks, let me share what I wrote: “In a pluralistic society, faith communities should be concerned about the vitality of all families, including – but not limited to – the marital family. At the opening of the twenty-first century, we’re being challenged to draw a larger picture of love, commitment, and family that makes ample room for same-sex partnerships, one-parent households, extended families, blended families, and other relational patterns. Because one of the strengths of family as a cross-cultural institution is its adaptability, we need to ask the right questions. In particular, we need to keep the focus not on family form, but on things that truly matter ethically and spiritually: Protecting the dignity and well-being of all persons; insisting on the qualities of mutual respect, non-violence, and care in every relationship; sharing power and goods fairly; and making sure that the community is invested in guaranteeing that every family receives the support and resources necessary for their members to thrive. For me, the ethical bottom line is this: relational justice and integrity for all families -- and in all families.”

In responding to the theme of this conference, “Blessing All Our Families,” I want to suggest that in order to bless all families, we need to do more than add queer families to the mix. Inclusion is good, but transformation is better. Expanding the circle is necessary, but it’s not sufficient as a change strategy. The more challenging agenda is a social justice agenda, to dig deep and transform the cultural assumptions and power dynamics that place some at disadvantage while granting others unearned privileges. In other words, we cannot do justice to families in all their diversity without doing justice in

and for our diverse communities. To move in the direction of relational justice, we need to move in the direction of queering the community, transforming the social order, so that all persons, whether partnered or not, and all families, whether state licensed, church blessed, or not, have the resources and support they need to flourish.

Here I'm using the term queer not as a synonym for gay or lesbian, but rather to designate all those persons, across a broad array of sexual and social differences, who are out of compliance with the dominant sex/gender paradigm and who, in dissenting from racist, classist, and heterosexist patriarchal norms, seek to rebuild community on the basis of mutual respect, compassion, and an inclusive justice. Not all, but certainly many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons are also happily queer. So, too, many of our heterosexual allies are very queer and proudly so. Queerness is not about biology or identity, but rather about our spirituality, ethical commitments, and politics. Queer spirituality insists on putting justice-making at the very heart of the life of faith.

Flannery O'Connor said it well: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you odd." Ethicist Larry Rasmussen puts it this way: The mission of the Jesus movement is to exercise "creative deviance on the frontline."<sup>1</sup> Why deviance? Because we must refuse to go along with the conventional definitions. Why creative? Because we must use our moral imaginations to envision constructive alternatives. Why "on the frontline?" Because we won't be able to simply think our way through this cultural crisis. Rather, we must find ways to act together to deepen solidarity, as well as protect the earth.

Making this queer turn toward ethically creative deviance can captivate and energize people, as I hope and trust it has captivated and continues to energize you, but it

also frightens others. Family fundamentalists, for example, insist that there's one and only one right way to be family, and they've organized to enshrine the heterosexual marital family as the only legally recognized and religiously blessed household pattern. Their claims are familiar: only the marital family is real family, and, furthermore, marriage requires the union of one man and one woman. In their judgment, marriage is valid only when there's gender difference, but reading the subtext reveals more of their political and theological agenda: marriage requires not only gender difference, but also gender inequality – a social hierarchy with a dominant male and subordinate female. (Think of the Southern Baptist Convention's resolution calling women to graciously submit to their husbands.)

For social and religious conservatives, the patriarchal marital family is the fundamental building block of a social order constructed – they would say divinely mandated – as an interlocking pattern of natural hierarchies: male over female, adult over child, rich over poor, white over non-white, Christian over all others. Marriage exclusivism is all about preserving privilege: male privilege, heterosexual privilege, and white cultural privilege. Yes, marriage exclusivists are defending a particular family form, but they're also defending an elitist social order and a theocratic worldview, calling upon religion to legitimate social inequities as divinely ordained.

The heat that marriage exclusivism generates comes, in large part, from patriarchal Christianity's obsession with, and fear of, sex. In transmitting Christian sex-phobia, conservatives count on the fact that gender and sexual non-conformity will alarm people, even those who are themselves non-conforming. (After all, the Bible-belt has the highest divorce rate in the U.S.). Even so, conservatives assume that respectable people

marry, restrain their sexuality, and settle down, thereby establishing their credentials as responsible adults. In contrast, LGBT persons are presumed, by definition, to be “out of control,” and queerness has become cultural code for sexual looseness and moral immaturity, precisely because queer sex is not marital and, therefore, not properly constrained. We live and love outside the box.

As marriage dissidents, LGBT people are not alone. A growing number of heterosexual couples are living together and either postponing marriage or refusing to marry altogether. All these non-conformists claim a freedom not to marry and, at the same time, the right to be sexually active. No wonder the Christian Right is flummoxed!

Consider some other cultural changes, which are not so much the product of feminism and gay liberation, but as Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim point out, are rather long-term societal changes in terms of aging, housing, childcare, and labor:

- Marital reproductive households are no longer in the majority, and most Americans spend half their adult lives outside marriage.
- The average age at which people marry has steadily risen as young people live together longer.
- The number of cohabitating couples rose 72 percent between 1990 and 2000, including cohabitating senior citizens.
- More people live alone, and many live in multigenerational, non-marital households; 41 percent of these unmarried households include children.
- Increasing numbers of elderly, particularly women, live in companionate, non-conjugal unions (think “Golden Girls”).<sup>2</sup>

While LGBT people and cohabitating heterosexual couples shoulder the burden of being displaced persons outside the marital system, at the same time our marginality has given us freedom to invent alternative ways of creating intimate partnership and family. “Banished from the privileges of marriage,” Alison Solomon writes, “we have been spared its imperatives,”<sup>3</sup> including its gender rigidity, its preoccupation with the couple apart from the community, and procreative duty.

The religious right, fearful that this freedom from marriage and its mandates may catch on, has launched a “traditional family values” campaign in order to depict queerness – life outside marriage – as dangerous, difficult, and tragic. By targeting LGBT people for condemnation, this campaign is clearly aimed at keeping same-sex couples out of the marital “inner circle,” but their primary audience is the heterosexual cultural majority. Focus on the Family and other organizations certainly want to keep the likes of me outside marriage, but their even stronger concern is to keep heterosexual couples pinned into the conventional sex/gender system. Gay bashing sends a signal, to gays and straights alike, that any deviance from patriarchal norms will be subject to ridicule, violence, and even death. Such threats are highly effective in dissuading people from giving credence to, much less acting on, the rather intoxicating notions of sexual freedom, gender flexibility, and bodily self-determination.

What’s fascinating, but perhaps not surprising, is that at least some same-sex couples are interested in acquiring the right to marry, both civilly and religiously. After all, civil marriage is one of the most subsidized of state institutions, and significant economic and social benefits accrue to those who marry. Moreover, marriage is a powerful cultural symbol of attaining adult status and “becoming normal,” so to speak.

Ours is, in fact, a marriage culture in which upwards of 90 to 95 percent of all adults will marry at least once before the age of 65. Because gays and lesbians also grow up in this culture, doesn't it make sense that many would think that marriage is something that should also be available to them?

Although some are troubled that same-sex couples may only be mimicking heterosexuality in seeking to marry, it can be argued that something far more interesting and potentially transformative is underway. What's really remarkable, I suggest, is how so many in the heterosexual cultural majority are living and acting in ways that can only be described as gay.

First of all, for most heterosexual couples, their normative sexual practice is contracepted, not procreative sex, which means that most are engaging in sexual activity for the purpose of sharing pleasure and intimacy. That's queer.

Secondly, many heterosexual couples are breaking with conventional gender roles and expectations and seeking a more equitable distribution of rights, responsibilities, and power in their partnerships and families. That's also queer.

Thirdly, many heterosexual persons are experimenting with family forms, honoring their affectional ties to friends and other loved ones, and developing significant kinship networks in addition to, and sometimes as a substitute for, biological family. That, too, is very queer.

These trends suggest that, to a great extent, the heterosexual cultural majority is coming to resemble gay culture with its "notorious" gender flexibility (think drag kings and drag queens), its openness to and experimentation with diverse family patterns (think polyamory), and its "indulgence," so to speak, with the pleasures of non-procreative sex

(think about variations of ethical eroticism). Therefore, “contrary to popular belief, and even some gay rights rhetoric,” Michael Bronski observes, “gay people have not been patterning their lives on the structures of heterosexuality; rather, the opposite has occurred. Heterosexuals who have increasingly been rejecting traditional structures of sexuality and gender have been reorganizing in ways pioneered by gay men and lesbians.”<sup>4</sup>

This cultural change process may be thought of as an unsettling, yet potentially transformative dynamic of reverse assimilation. The lesson in this, Bronski adds, may be that “only when those in the dominant culture realize that they are better off acting like gay people will the world change and be a better, safer, and more pleasurable place for everyone.”<sup>5</sup>

As religious leaders and cultural workers for a comprehensive social justice, we must reframe the struggle for same-sex marriage and civil unions as part and parcel of a larger campaign for relational equality and communal security which aims to promote the social and economic security of all families, not only the marital family. While we must make a compelling case for extending marriage rights and religious rites to same-sex couples, we must at the same time protect the right not to marry, without social stigma or economic penalty.

I hope we’ll also reclaim the Reformed understanding of marriage as a vocation to which only some are suited or have the necessary gifts. Marriage should not be viewed as a duty, expected of all – much less something compelled. The high divorce rate in this nation has everything to do with the high marriage rate and the fact that too many people marry the wrong person, for the wrong reasons, at the wrong time. The church can do a

great service by no longer promoting marriage per se, but only encouraging just and loving relationships in all their variety – and by helping to educate and equip people for equality and mutual respect in all their relating.

The church can also help by naming that there is a crisis in marriage and family life, but that the crisis is not the result of a visible LGBT community or the movement for sexual and gender justice. Quite to the contrary. Feminist and queer activists and theorists have taken the lead in analyzing current social reality as oppressive and in developing strategies of resistance and transformation. In particular, the feminist and queer liberation movements have made the connections explicit between the pain and conflict many experience in their personal lives and the larger social disorder – how sexism, racism, and poverty undermine personal well-being and community coherence, especially for those without social power and status.

What is undermining family life for the vast majority in the U.S. and elsewhere is not same-sex love or same-sex partnerships, not even marriage equality, but rather advanced capitalism's erosion of social and economic security and the destruction of communities, as well as the earth, for the purpose of maximizing wealth for a few. Moreover, conditions of modernity have precipitated a cultural sea change as a post-industrial economic order has loosened social obligations to neighbors and strangers and as communal ties of affiliation and connectedness have dissipated. In the process, people have increasingly turned to private relationships, primarily marriage and family, for identity, support, and fulfillment.

However, and here we have a big caveat, romantic relationships, even enduring ones, are no substitute for a richly textured community life. As historian Stephanie

Coontz writes, “It has only been in the last century that Americans have put all their emotional eggs in the basket of coupled love. Because of this change, many of us have found joys in marriage that our great-great-grandparents never did. But we have also neglected our other relationships, placing too many burdens on a fragile institution and making social life poorer in the process.” The consequence, Coontz points out, is that “as Americans lose the wider face-to-face ties that build social trust, they become more dependent on romantic relationships for intimacy and deep communication, and more vulnerable to isolation if a relationship breaks down.”<sup>6</sup>

So what’s the solution? Again, Coontz is helpful: “We should raise our expectations for, and commitment to, other relationships [in addition to marriage and family], especially since so many people now live so much of their lives outside marriage. Paradoxically, we can strengthen our marriages the most by not expecting them to be our sole refuge from the pressures of the modern work force. Instead we need to restructure both work and social life so that we can reach out and build ties with others, including people who are single or divorced.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, we must not reinforce the skewed privatized notion of marriage as “you and me against the world,” but rather help people connect more strongly to their communities and empower them to participate in, and contribute to, the broader social world.

In the midst of this cultural crisis, people of faith must hold onto a much larger gift than families, as valuable as these are. We must embrace and revitalize community and truly celebrate the precious fact that our lives are fully social and deeply intertwined. Our mutual dependence is a gift from God. Carter Heyward expresses the matter this way: “‘We are the boat. We are the sea. I sail in you. You sail in me.’ This is the truth

of our lives, and it is the essence of our goodness.”<sup>8</sup> Diversity, including family diversity, is, therefore, not only a fact of life. Diversity is also an asset for enriching community, not a problem to be fixed or wished away.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, there is a very difficult problem to deal with, in pastoral care as well as in prophetic social witness: namely, the stress mounting on almost every family and household. During the past twenty-five years, beginning with the Reagan revolution and its dismantling of the liberal welfare state, we’ve witnessed the rise of corporate capitalism along with its demand that taxes on the rich be drastically cut and social spending radically curtailed. With the morally callous demand for privatization, neo-liberal economic policies have undermined the common good and steadily pushed economic and social responsibility away from employers and government and onto private households.

Neo-liberalism’s ideology of radical individualism promotes a great cultural lie: that whether a person or a community sinks or swims, it’s somehow all up to that person or that community alone. Success belongs to the individual alone, and if you fail, no one will come to your aid, especially if you’re poor, non-white, and non-English speaking. (Think New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina.) With the widening economic gap between the super-rich and everyone else, the stress on families and households is intensifying as people try to make due with less. As one example of the erosion of social solidarity, consider how care for the most vulnerable among us -- children and the elderly, as well as for the ill and disabled -- is no longer defined as a social or community responsibility, but rather has been shifting steadily onto the shoulders of unpaid women at home or to privately employed domestic workers who are often poorly-paid immigrant women of

color. As Duggan and Kim rightly conclude, “In this context, household stability [and household security have] become a life-and-death issue.”<sup>10</sup> Keeping body and soul together has become increasingly challenging -- and increasingly complex -- for more and more persons, for more and more families, and for more and more communities.

In the midst of this social and cultural crisis, the Right has cruelly played the race card and the sex/gender card, again and again, to scapegoat vulnerable groups and divert attention from the real source of our cultural woes, runaway capitalism and the collapse of democracy. If faith communities have hope to offer, it is only by resisting this social and economic madness. We must insist that the world is not divisible into those worthy to live and those whose deaths won't disturb us. We must refuse to be pitted, in fear and hate, against one another. We must stand, shoulder to shoulder, and declare that all persons and all families matter, including our own and those least like our own. Our credibility, ethically and spiritually speaking, utterly depends on whether we are willing to resist capitalist plutocracy, publicly critique Christian patriarchalism, and do whatever is in our power to embody a liberating spirituality of justice.

Some years ago, theologian Robert McAfee Brown, in speaking about peacemaking, acknowledged that working for peace is oftentimes experienced as a futile exercise, like butting your head against a wall. But from another vantage point, he suggested, peacemaking can be empowering, even liberating, because it aligns oneself with the power at the very heart of the universe.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, blessing all families is liberating work, grounded in some very traditional Christian values: love and justice.

About love, we can say at least this: The freedom to love and be loved defines our very humanness. One of the most dehumanizing aspects of chattel slavery was the denial

of the right of those enslaved to love, marry, and form secure families. Denying the right to enter into intimate partnership or be recognized as family continues to be a deeply dehumanizing, deeply offensive tool of oppression.

About justice, we can say at least this: Justice is about sharing resources fairly, including power, but it's also about showing respect for persons. When the Vermont Supreme Court in 1999 issued its ruling that same-sex couples are entitled to the same rights and responsibilities as other citizens, including the right to form intimate associations, the Court said: "When all is said and done, this is about our common humanity."<sup>12</sup>

In this talk I've argued that celebrating our common humanity requires making a queer turn toward radical equality within and among all our families and, importantly, also toward strengthening the common good by rebuilding a vibrant, wildly inclusive social order. Justice in and for families requires us to confront economic and ecological injustice and to dismantle entrenched power that's putting the entire planet at risk. The queer agenda, never only about sex or even sexual justice, is rather a persistent, unwavering demand for the renewal of all life-in-community. The change we seek is not mere inclusion, but rather spiritual, moral, political, economic, and cultural transformation. Clearly, our agenda is neither narrow nor modest: to make the church and world oddly, proudly queer -- that is, deeply invested in seeking right relation in the family and beyond.

Turning queer is also a privileged way of remaining loyal to God, who, as these things go, is also rather queer: passionate about justice, no respecter of social rank or

status, and graciously at work “making all things new.” If God is queer, shouldn’t we also be willing to throw all caution to the wind and “go and do likewise”?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Larry Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities,” in Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, “Beyond Gay Marriage,” The Nation July 18/25, 2005, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Solomon, “Get Married? Yes, But Not by the State,” Village Voice January 9, 1996, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Bronski, The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 242-3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Coontz, “Too Close for Comfort,” New York Times November 7, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. See also “Study: Gain a Spouse, Lose Your Friends,” Portland Press Herald May 29, 2007, A4.

<sup>8</sup> Carter Heyward, Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, “Beyond Gay Marriage,” The Nation July 18/25, 2005, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, Religion and Violence: A Primer for White Americans (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Baker v. Vermont (filed December 20, 1999), 6, cited on the web page of Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, [www.glad.org](http://www.glad.org).