

Gay Marriage

by **Ron Dudum**

Gay marriage is a divisive political issue that offers little room to build consensus. Nevertheless, using principles developed at length in my book *Three Paradigms of Reality: From Homer to Einstein*, I will offer here a strategy for compromise.

We live today within the competitive modern paradigm of self, whereby all people have a “right” to their opinions, no matter how misguided these may be. On an issue as controversial as gay marriage, advocates on either side will defend their positions, vilify their opponents, and fight forever to achieve victory. The goal of finding consensus, on the other hand, requires an attitude of cooperation.

Many Americans look down on the tribal characteristics of other peoples, when in reality this nation is as tribalistic as any—with its rich versus poor, corporations versus unions, or Republicans versus Democrats.* Each tribe expects loyalty and conformity from its members. For example, socially conservative groups oppose gay marriage, whereas socially liberal groups favor it. There is no amount of reason or debate that will change the position of either tribe, since they both believe they are upholding fundamental principles. In order for one side to win, the other must lose.

In their advertising campaigns designed to persuade people in the middle, the opponents frame the debate as exclusively an issue of civil liberties or religious freedom.

*Incidentally, the very term *Americans* inflates the tribal status of people who reside in the United States over the status of millions of other people who also inhabit the North and South American continents.

In the winner-take-all nature of modern-day political campaigns, 50% plus 1 determines whose definition wins—until the next election, which ignites the battle all over again.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, marriage has long been both a religious sacrament and a sacred metaphor. The sacramental character of marriage blesses the union with mystery and divine grace. Its metaphorical character symbolizes human participation with the divine.

In the early Christian church, theologians emphasized the virtues of humility and patience. The early Christian formula for salvation involved love of God and service to others. There was no compromise on positions of faith, but there was also no obligation to conquer opposing opinions. Modern historians of the western Christian church may challenge this statement, but eastern Christians in certain areas survived 1,300 years as a minority community among a Muslim majority because of their humility and their faith in the “world to come.”

In the political reality of the United States, on the other hand, there is no humility, no patience, and no transcendent strategy for cooperation. Supporters of gay marriage will not accept anything less than civil equality under the rule of law. Opponents of gay marriage will vigorously oppose every attempt to secularize the marital institution. We are doomed to battle this issue until one side or the other gives up—or, more likely, dies out.

There is, however, a cooperative strategy that could lead us out of this unending conflict and strengthen our nation in the process. That strategy involves an attitude of acceptance and respect for all sides. Supporters of gay marriage should understand that

the practice has been recognized as a religious sacrament for thousands of years. The fact that modern marriages end in divorce more than half the time does not mean that everyone who gets married today is casual about the religious significance of divine mystery.

Opponents of gay marriage should understand that we live in a nation that is governed by the rule of law. Our 200-year-old Constitution does not tolerate racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination. We fought a civil war to defend the principle of equality. All public officials swear to uphold the Constitution, not their own belief systems. Thus, it is only a matter of time before the rule of law applies the principle of equality to anyone seeking the secular union of marriage.

Respect for the sacramental nature of marriage and acceptance of the rule of law lead to one solution that opponents and supporters of gay marriage can work on together—namely, changing the references in all civil documents and codes from “marriage” to “civil union.” Religious communities should not define unions outside of their respective congregations. All unions approved by the state should enjoy the same legal rights and tax benefits.

Of course, this strategy for cooperation requires a transcendent commitment to the common good of our nation. Alas, no such commitment exists today, leaving political competition as the only pragmatic way to resolve the conflict.