

A BUDDHIST'S VIEW ON GAY MARRIAGE

Marriage was not always a religious ceremony. Well before Christianity and Islam appeared, and independent of any Jewish tradition, Buddhism recognized and supported marriage without claiming to have invented it. The fact is that the rite of marriage existed before religion, and thus no one faith can legitimately claim ownership of it.

So, religion did not invent marriage. It took an existing institution, made a sacrament out of it, and added its own rules, such as forbidding marriage with one from another religion. Happily, many of these antiquated and oppressive rules, imposed by religion on marriage, have been abandoned as the freedoms of our peoples grew.

Marriage does have a spiritual dimension, which is the reason why it has been celebrated by all religious traditions. Having performed many Buddhist wedding ceremonies myself, I recognize that a marriage is in a different league from a commitment. You cannot equate the profound beauty of a marriage ceremony with other long term commitments one makes, such as, for example, with one's bank manager in promising to keep to the terms of a mortgage over thirty years. That is why the suggestion that a civil contract is good enough for gays and lesbians is like throwing crumbs to the hungry. It is not acceptable to them, or to any other clear thinking person.

Marriage is that ceremony that formally expresses, in front of family and friends, that unique leap into vulnerability and trust called adult love. Two people put their faith not in a God, but in intimacy, physical and emotional. After marriage, they strive to not think of themselves, nor of their partner, but only of "us". Their spiritual journey advances with the discovery of meaning in this closest of relationships, not in the individual. That is why it begs for a religious component, like a flower begs for water.

In the recent past, the word "religion" meant a belief in a supernatural being, and this unfairly excluded Buddhism. The meaning of the word "religion" has since evolved to include Buddhism. Words do change their meaning, just as the meaning of the word "gay" has changed. Thus, there is no logical reason to hold that the meaning of "marriage" cannot change to become more inclusive, like the meaning of "religion" has.

There will always be those who attempt to hold back progress by arousing the fear of moral decline and the loss of values crucial to the well being of society. Permitting gay marriage will no more destroy society than legislating to ban the thrashing of children destroyed society. We owe it to the institution of marriage, and to those who are married, to extend its warmth to those who are presently excluded. Extending love can only make for a better society.

I see no reason why religion should deny their spiritual resources to gay and lesbian marriages. Again, marriage was there before religion. Religion does not own the institution of marriage and has no right to govern it. As a Buddhist leader, I would very much like to perform the Buddhist marriage ceremony for gays and lesbians. Why should Buddhists be denied this opportunity? Let other religions make the rules for their own members, but may they not make the rules for the Buddhists.

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