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<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/marriage_in_societychurchstate.html>

**"Marriage" in Society/Church/State**

*What is marriage? Is it a sacred rite or a civil right? What role, if any, should religious institutions, traditions or beliefs have in the legal act of marriage?*

While [**Dr. Welton Gaddy's white paper**](http://www.interfaithalliance.org/equality/read)'s form is an invitation to dialog toward "common ground," it's content is a thorough bash-job against all opposition to defining "marriage" down to include same-sex unions. One would think that the president of an organization calling itself the "Interfaith Alliance" would write a *green* paper, fairly presenting the range of opinions in hope of engaging the widest possible participation. Instead, what he's produced is a well-crafted position paper in the continuing national debate. (But an "Interfaith Alliance" for what? A sidebar ad to his paper appeals for supporting the Alliance as promotive of "LGBT [lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender] equality.")

1....The paper's basic fault is its failure to recognize *the third rail* underneath "church" and "state," the rail which empowers both. It is society, *human society*, the basic stuff that anthropology studies. Each society has a fabric of mouth-sounds, a language enabling communication and regulation, including the defining of relationships. Each language has a word for every society's fundamental institution, which is the man-woman socially recognized sexual bonding. In English, that word is "marriage." A decision to have no word for that institution is a violation of human society itself. It is, in linguistic perspective, an anthropological monstrosity.

2.....Gaddy's basic failure is compounded by another. Instead of inviting all Americans to discuss the issue of government language for same-sex unions, (according to "On Faith") he's calling for a quite *narrow and loaded*"national discussion on marriage based on the premise that 'Law, not scripture, is the foundation of government regulations related to marriage in our nation.'" For the discussion, he claims that the U.S. Constitution "provides a secure foundation independent of religion." First, he eliminates society, leaving church and state. Next, he eliminates scripture and religion, leaving law (narrowly defined as America's Constitution). A godless, scriptureless, religionless game is to be played on a board on which only constitutional lawyers are masters.

3.....Except for two brief uses of "unions," Gaddy's long position-paper consistently speaks of "same-sex *marriage*," incorporating his answer into the question. He wants us Americans to "live together without violating the basic nature of our democracy," but he himself violates one of democracy's principles, which is fair-play. He says he's "motivated by confidence in the power of religion" to effect reconciliation, yet for his paper's purpose he sets religion aside.

4.....An instance of Gaddy's slippery wording: "Civil marriage is a secular institution." Of course it is! In American law, "civil" is "secular." But until the current controversy, in American law *"civil marriage" has always and only meant man/woman marriage*. His next sentence: "The California Supreme Court even raised the possibility of choosing a word other than marriage to designate the civil relationship." To that possibility, Gaddy gives no support even though turning the possibility into an actuality would virtually end the conflict. (He cites a poll indicating that 57% of voters favor same-sex "unions," but only 29% favor same-sex "marriages.")

5.....On a 2004 PBS panel, I spoke strongly for*equal rights*, the constitutional principle: a same-sex union should have the same rights as a marriage. But I spoke as strongly*against defining "marriage" down* to include same-sex unions. The Constitution nowhere speaks to this, which is the central issue, which Gaddy tries to obscure by his sanctional citing of the Constitution. His rhetoric can even produce this weird either/or: "marriage is a civil issue, not a religious issue in the United States."

6.....Gaddy mentions, but rejects, the proposal that government get out of the "marriage" business and authorize only "unions," hetero- and homo-sexual. "Marriage" could then *retain, undisturbed, its anthropological and religious meanings*. I favor the proposal at least as the basis for a clear and honest debate, though it is improbable that legislatures would ever erase the word "marriage" from the corpus juris civilis.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  JULY 27, 2009; 10:43 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:                       
PREVIOUS:**[**MY WIFE AND HER HUSBANDS**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/herb_silverman/2009/07/my_wife_and_her_husbands.html)**| NEXT:**[**A MORE FAITHFUL WAY TO TALK ABOUT MARRIAGE**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/c_welton_gaddy/2009/07/a_call_to_quiet_conversations_and_public_debates.html)

**Comments**

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Or, to put it more briefly, this is \*not\* about, 'Should LBGT people be satisfied with civil unions,'

\*until we have the damn civil unions.\*

You can go ahead and 'favor' them, but it doesn't matter why you would rather put my family through pain than 'accept a definition' ...Until you actually make em happen.

Standing around arguing how you somehow know better than I do how 'married' I am... Cause you're straight... Doesn't help.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | AUGUST 3, 2009 5:02 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Well, freestinker, I guess if the shoe doesn't fit... We're still waiting on the Reverend to tell us of his tireless efforts to get LBGT people in America recognized as worthy, deserving, and needing of the civil unions he 'favors' ...rather than going out of his way to claim there's something essentially \*unworthy\* about us for anything of the \*kind\* unless we submit to his particular academic definition of what a 'marriage' is....

Again, the point is clear. Christians.

If you want a \*definition of marriage\* \*all to yourselves,\* and it's \*worth it to you to put LBGT people through all this \*over\* it, when we're \*just\* gonna call ourselves married \*anyway,\*

And if you want to say we're \*whining\* about the difference between marriages and civil unions, neither of which do we \*have,\*...

Then \*you\* pony up with the civil unions \*before\* claiming we're asking too much. You may find that, like with DADT, the law isn't as cuddly about the distinction as you may like to believe... But I'm willing to go there to find out.

I see \*no\* reason for any of these arguments that I shouldn't be married equally under the law because \*you\* would rather call \*my\* marriage a civil union should be any justification at all for my sweetie and I to go through such hard times over a matter of your comfort, which is apparently a big enough deal for Reverends to spend time demeaning us over in this world of troubles ...and in fact fighting even civil unions laws...

But not worth just giving us the civil unions which \*do\* have majority support in America, however naively.

If you wanna get us that, great. It would be appreciated. Then, and only then could you say it's just a matter of definitions.

If it's just LBGT people \*against\* you and you're just trying to set the goal where you like, and you don't want to put these free and equal civil unions in the world where they matter, then, it's irelevant.

I'll take whatever pitch I can hit. I'm going for Justice.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | AUGUST 3, 2009 4:57 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

"Seriously, though. If that's what you straights \*want,\* \*\*do\* it.\*
Then when it's \*done,\* we can talk about what subset of citizens is 'asking too much' of what another thinks they deserve to have all to yourselves.
Not before.
Pony up with the civil unions before you start splitting hairs about 'definitions' you're comfy with. "

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PaganPlace,

Who said I was straight and what difference does it make anyway?

Sexual orientation shouldn't prevent anyone from recognizing discrimination (and religious entanglement) in the law.

Truthfully, I don't care what we call it as long as the law applies to all citizens equally, regardless of gender.

You tell me where I can go to vote for civil unions for all and I guarantee I'll beat you there.

Otherwise, marriage equality in the law is the way to go and I voted exactly so when I last had the chance.

**POSTED BY: FREESTINKER | AUGUST 3, 2009 4:07 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

--- DOWN with OBAMA & CO., comes 2012 and beyond!!!

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Prof. GATES Must GO To Jail For almost (Conspiring) insighting a National (RACE BASED)RIOT! The TERRORISTS & CO., are LOVE-in THIS!

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..........(||)RACE-GATES(.||)
............|"""""""""""""""""""""|.
....|ACTS AGAINST AMERICAN|
......|A-CRYIN-LYING-SHAME|.

-- W O W! The "mistake" (election) is leaching-out Through that African/American GATES like "A FREUDIAN SLIP OF GENUINE PROPHECY"!?? Soo,

"A White Crackers ain't gota Chance
against a Black Cracker" anymore?

What happened to the "Planet of The Apes"?

Mr. OBAMA. Please, like an EX-Friend, Distance yourself from Mr. "Race-GATES", like ye didth with REVrend/Brother Mr. Wrong, ooopps Meant Rev. Jeramiah (Bull-Frog) Mr. Wright!

**POSTED BY: HOMELAND1 | AUGUST 2, 2009 1:17 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

"people of all sexual persuasions."

Learn the word 'orientations.' I assure you that of attempts at 'persuasion' I've seen the most professional. The best they can hope for is Stockholm Syndrome.

'Persuasion' is irrelevant. It's not gonna start working now, it never has.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 31, 2009 6:12 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

There was a comma missing in my use of secular legal marriage (BTW - it's not "tautological" - there are societies in this world where laws are both legal and religious) - but the point remains. You have stressed the points that are in COMMON with this bottom-line, religious-based definition of the word "marriage" and all the legal issues that are addressed by the legal community.

But you are ignoring the DIFFERENCES. And unless and until our legal structure is pulled apart and put back together again using some other term than marriage that allows us to apply \*that\* term to civil unions of all types, it's the system we have.

Preserving the mouth-sound "marriage" is of much less importance to me than preserving the rights of people of all sexual persuasions.

**POSTED BY: IAMWEAVER | JULY 31, 2009 4:40 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

"Then all committed couples would be treated equally under the law and every church or individual would be free to define marriage according to their individual faith tradition."

"It's a win-win solution for all."

Freestinker

Just like 'Don't ask, Dont' Tell.' It'll be great.

Seriously, though. If that's what you straights \*want,\* \*\*do\* it.\*

Then when it's \*done,\* we can talk about what subset of citizens is 'asking too much' of what another thinks they deserve to have all to yourselves.

Not before.

Pony up with the civil unions before you start splitting hairs about 'definitions' you're comfy with.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 31, 2009 4:02 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Rev. Elliott,

Since you favor full and equal legal protections for all civil marriages/unions regardless of gender, then the actual distinction you propose is in name only.

I wholeheartedly agree that the better solution is to remove the word "marriage" from the legal code and replace it with the term "civil union".

Then all committed couples would be treated equally under the law and every church or individual would be free to define marriage according to their individual faith tradition.

It's a win-win solution for all.

**POSTED BY: FREESTINKER | JULY 31, 2009 2:40 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

On a practical note, Reverend:

"6.....Gaddy mentions, but rejects, the proposal that government get out of the "marriage" business and authorize only "unions," hetero- and homo-sexual. "Marriage" could then retain, undisturbed, its anthropological and religious meanings. I favor the proposal at least as the basis for a clear and honest debate, though it is improbable that legislatures would ever erase the word "marriage" from the corpus juris civilis."

If you want to take 'marriage' out of the body of American law, and give us all equal unions, \*you\* do it. Don't tell a minority that wants equal treatment that somehow we're supposed to fight \*you\* for any rights of any kind at all.

I think you'll find that it's actually a lot easier to \*let go\* of your attachment to the definition of a word than to pit us all against each other, and put LBGT people through so much harm and injustice just so you can be comfy with a 'definition' that was never yours, (or mine) to control in the first place.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 31, 2009 1:49 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Can you even hear yourself, Reverend?

"

TO BRICKERD

My column was against "insularity," not for it. My appeal is to anthropology, the science of NOT being insular, but of studying ALL of humanity."

ALL of humanity, Reverend? Really?

"It would be insular to eliminate, from American English, its word for the basic human institution, heterosexual commitment. Historically, our American word for this relationship is "marriage."
Defining "marriage" down to include homosexual commitments would leave our language with no word for the basis human institution."

So, in your study of 'ALL Humanity,' only heterosexuality is 'basic and human?'

Is that where your 'definition' of me comes from?

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 31, 2009 12:20 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

If that's not clear enough, Reverend, you keep misconstruing my point:

It's not down to definitions \*unless and until\* it's \*only\* down to definitions.

You can't attack the dignity of gay couples and claim we should be 'satisfied' with civil unions \*we do not have.\* This is not how the choice for America comes down.

And, as I said, I don't care if you \*make it a crime\* for my dear one and I to be together. When we're married before the Gods, it's going to be a marriage, whether you like the definition or not.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 31, 2009 12:10 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Reverend:

"TO PAGAN PLACE

"Reading you, nobody would ever suspect these truths:
1.....I favor gay unions.
2.....I favor government recognition of gay unions.
3.....I favor the equal civil-legal rights of marriage and gay unions.
4.....I favor religious ceremonies celebrating gay unions"

This kind of 'support' doesn't mean you aren't using semantic arguments that tend to convince people we're unworthy of anything of the \*kind,\* just so you can have your particular religious 'definition of marriage' have special status for heterosexuals, and presumably Christians.

Keep saying \*my\* marriage would be 'defining down' from heterosexual ones, even if they are done in Vegas.

It's still dehumanizing.

It's also aside from the point.

Equal marriage is one way that we can have our unions: because it's equal justice under the law: A national 'civil unions' law would be more popular, yes, but still be based on the false premise of 'separate but equal' and is not going to come any faster if you keep denigrating us, even if in your mind it's 'only a little.'

This is not down to 'definitions of marriage' \*unless and until\* the circumstance actually exists where we \*have\* civil unions that are as equal as possible.

Until then, my life and rights as a citizen do not come down to whether or not you have the 'right' to define my marriage as not-marriage.

However much you think heterosexuals are just that much spiffier cause they at least \*look\* like they might breed, even if that's not on the table.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 31, 2009 12:02 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

What will she be? Corpse Bride or Princess Bride? God only knows about some of you people and doesn't care about the rest. That's why the police have job security. Keep the kids safe. We'll keep making more little deputies for the safety of all.

Support your local county sheriff.

**POSTED BY: DERMITT | JULY 31, 2009 10:29 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Rev. Elliott,

With all due respect, and respect is due, your opinion on this issue is irrelevant. The same is true of every clerical opinion, regardless of religious affiliation.

Let me go further. No one's opinion matters, regardless of the capacity in which he or she speaks. The ISSUE is JUSTICE, EQUAL RIGHTS UNDER THE LAW. J.U.S.T.I.C.E.

I don't give a darn who renders what including the US Supreme Court. Should it go to SCOTUS and if the JUstices issue a silly decision, it will go to SCOTUS again and again and again.

Some of us will never stop fighting for getting Instututionalized Religion the hell out of the government and that means out of the marriage business altogether.

Ditto, faith-based funding, and faith-based funding Officers.

Ditto, nonprofit status for insitutions of organized religion.

Nobody pays me to join with like-minded others in these battles. In fact, everything possible that can be done to suppress us has been done, will be done. Information is not readily available; we all have day jobs. But we fight on. And make no mistake. These fights ain't gonna end anytime soon.

American gays who wish to marry will marry, Rev. Trust me on this. They will. Religionists who wish to make the US a third world country will not succeed.

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ1MANSOURI1 | JULY 30, 2009 10:40 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO BRICKERD

My column was against "insularity," not for it. My appeal is to anthropology, the science of NOT being insular, but of studying ALL of humanity.

It would be insular to eliminate, from American English, its word for the basic human institution, heterosexual commitment. Historically, our American word for this relationship is "marriage."
Defining "marriage" down to include homosexual commitments would leave our language with no word for the basis human institution.

**POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | JULY 30, 2009 5:38 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO IAMWEAVER

You speak of "'marriage' in a secular legal sense."
1
Your misunderstanding is in your tautology,"secular legal." In the U.S., law is secular.
2
Until the current controversy over whether the word "marriage" should continue to mean (as it does all over the globe)heterosexual commitment. If "marriage" were defined downward to include homosexual commitments, American English would be without a word for the basic human institution, the heterosexual commitment. As I said, getting along without such a word would be an "anthropological monstrosity."
3
Your further misunderstanding is that the "secular" meaning of "marriage" has long included homosexual unions. It never has. Indeed, it's a new phrase, intended as synonymous with "civil marriage." And "civil marriage" has never included homosexual unions.

**POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | JULY 30, 2009 5:31 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO PAGAN PLACE

Reading you, nobody would ever suspect these truths:
1.....I favor gay unions.
2.....I favor government recognition of gay unions.
3.....I favor the equal civil-legal rights of marriage and gay unions.
4.....I favor religious ceremonies celebrating gay unions.

Nothing I said in this week's column abridges anything I've said in this note to you.

**POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | JULY 30, 2009 5:12 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I mean, \*really\* Reverend. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. If you want to quibble about horning your particular religious definitions of 'marriage' onto \*civil marriage,\* then \*first\* seek to make sure civil marriage is equal to \*all\* \*before\* you start with fussing about 'definitions' (other than legal) like they are important to anyone but those using them for an excuse to keep us in a third-class status.

Where \*is\* this 'equal in all but name' civil union you speak of?

Then, Reverend, will you set about telling me, as clergy, that when I celebrate handfastings, with or without civil marriage licenses, that they must obey your 'definition of marriage?'

Not.

Gonna.

Happen.

Anyway.

Only thing stopping my dear one and I from being and calling ourselves \*married\* is I won't have her swear an oath before the Gods that the law might make it too harmful for her to keep.

We're planning, anyway. Your 'defintion' is not on the table.

This is about civil justice.

Period.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 29, 2009 5:30 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Rev. Elliott.

Don't you realize, that while you may protest the loss of an illusory control you believe your collar gives you over who can 'define marriage,' and invoke many tangential arguments why people should desire we're other than a nation of laws, with Liberty and Justice for all,

...That that's in fact all it is? You want to undercut the very idea that government should not control our religious beliefs, that it should promote \*civil equality and social justice,\* and \*not\* enforce religious beliefs?

In the case where you feel you can argue for government to act on \*your\* orders, you seem to want to portray this as a desireable circumstance, yet you and many anti-marriage equality advocates, seem to demand the right to own and carry automatic weapons, pollute our air and water, exploit our poor, and do all these other things on the basis of what you call 'free choice.' The 'Free market,' And yes, 'The American Mind.'

But in the case of feeling you have the influence to harm others materially in support of your views and theories, why, let's talk contingencies and abstractions and all manner of reasons why people should desire that the government deny fairness in civil contracts on the basis of religious beliefs, not public policy and our Constitution.

Problem there for you, sir, is that the Wheel never stops turning.

As much as you may admire what you argue is solely Christian virtue about our society, ...these protestations bring no justice, no peace, and not even, for your or your religion, anything like the security it thinks to cling to by materially harming me and so many others.

Maybe you sleep well at night, trying to obfuscate simple matters of what's fair and civil, justifying the unjust.

Perhaps you think that if you are (gasp) presently, actively, doing me and those dearest to me wrong, that you'll be 'forgiven' 'in the end.'

But it doesn't make it fair, or just.

It doesn't bring back the roofs over the head, the food on the table, the medical treatment or last moments together or the manifold simple dignities not enjoyed... That what you advocate has, does, and will deny.

It doesn't do one thing to redress, never mind justify, the unfairness and harm your position \*really actually does, no matter how much you try to claim it's OK.\*

I could argue on academic grounds, as usual.

But I ask, instead, Reverend.

How much pain in others do you think your opinions are really \*worth?\*

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 29, 2009 5:17 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I think it's funny when Christian conservatives attempt to invoke science to justify their fundamentally parochial, insular points of view. It's the most disingenuous of gestures -- they appear to be reaching beyond their narrow religious confines to demonstrate truth, but in reality, they are misinterpreting science and/or cherrypicking only the science-derived facts that support their points of view.

This isn't reaching out; it's just a more intense kind of insularity.

**POSTED BY: BRICKERD | JULY 29, 2009 11:28 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I apologize for mis-spelling the OP's name, My spellchecker apparently feels that Elliott shouldn't have two "t"'s on the end. How ironic...

**POSTED BY: IAMWEAVER | JULY 29, 2009 11:16 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Mr. Elliot's given definition of marriage looks to be choosing an intersection point in a multiple number of religious definitions. This does seem a sensical point from which to start - until you get tangled up in that very social fabric of which the OP speaks.

We can wax on about the number of years that the word "marriage" has had meaning in a secular context vs. a sacred context - but it all becomes meaningless posturing if, within several lifetimes of those of us on earth, the word has been used in both contexts with \*different\* meanings.

Mr. Elliot chooses to completely ignore the use of the word "marriage" in a secular legal sense - which is odd, since it's been that way since before his grandparent's time, at least here in the US. It's rather too late to try to pull those irons out of the fire, and frankly, is a bit silly. It's only a mouth-sound. No reason to invest your ego in it.

**POSTED BY: IAMWEAVER | JULY 29, 2009 11:15 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

The comments to this entry are closed.