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*The Gay Marriage Catch*

## SEXUAL HOCUS POCUS IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

By RAYMOND J. LAWRENCE

The Bishops of the Episcopal Church have finally granted permission for blessings of homosexual relationships, and also of homosexual marriages in those states where such marriage is permitted legally. So now any homosexual couple may request and potentially receive a blessing of their relationship by an Episcopal priest. Just like heterosexuals. Conservative priests may of course refuse, and conservative bishops may forbid such blessings in their dioceses. But they are a small, if noisy, minority. In spite of the noise, the decision appears to be a victory for homosexual and trans-gendered persons, and at first glance a victory for freedom, toleration, and liberal-mindedness.

But there is a catch. Contingent on the ecclesiastical blessing is the requirement of those receiving the blessing to commit to a life-long, sexually exclusive relationship. The Church is imposing on homosexuals the same burden it places on heterosexuals. The Bishops could hardly do otherwise unless they rethink their entire approach to sex. They could not grant more sexual freedom to homosexuals than they grant to heterosexuals. Thus they have now decided to impose the same medieval burden on both: sexual relationships limited to one exclusive relationship for life. This is an instance of the proverbial new wine poured into old wineskins. It's as if the leadership of the Church has not read any of the recent scholarship on the ethics of sex and marriage.

In spite of the fantasies of the Bishops, the old Christian medieval dream is gone for good and will not return. The traditional Christian doctrine of sex and marriage has more holes than Swiss cheese. Premarital virginity and lifelong sexually exclusive relationships have gone the way of the abacus. A bride decked out in white symbolizing her virginity, processing down the aisle to be joined to her husband, after which they will have their first sexual experience, and forever after cleave only unto each other, is so anachronistic as to be funny.

So now the Episcopal Church is going to impose the same phantasmagorical moral requirements on homosexual pairs as they have imposed on heterosexual pairs. The results will be further confusion. The clergy will have to learn about giving pre-marital counseling to homosexual couples when they don't know even how to provide it for heterosexuals. And bishops will need to learn how to assess and make judgments on the divorce and remarriage of homosexuals when they don't know how to make such judgments for heterosexuals. In short order they will all feel like Br'er Rabbit with Tarbaby.

**It could have been so easy for the bishops. They could have followed the urging of Karl Barth, one of the two preeminent theologians of the twentieth century, who urged the churches to get out of the marriage business altogether and leave it to the civil authorities. But the bishops preferred the lure of the medieval dream.**

**The bishops should have noticed that Christianity is the only major religion in the world that places such onerous and unworkable restrictions on sexual conduct. No other significant religion has bet the farm on sexually exclusive lifelong monogamous relationships. Neither of its two sister Abrahamic faiths support such a rigid imposition. Can anyone doubt that this bet has already been lost?**

**The bishops should also have observed that the biblical texts fail support the medieval dream of an exclusivist lifelong monogamy. Not unless one is expert at reading back into the text one's own wishes.**

**Yes, it could have been so easy for the bishops. When I was a young Episcopal cleric just out of seminary, the older priest whom I assisted once blessed a newly constructed highway overpass at an opening ceremony in Newport News, Virginia. He did not even inspect the overpass to see if it were well built. He wasn't competent to make such an inspection. I thought at the time and still do that the blessing was a silly gesture, but it was what some people wanted. The point is that an Episcopal priest has traditionally been free to bless anything without approval from bishops and without close inspection of the value of the blessed object. They bless houses, animals, treasured objects, ...and overpasses. Why, then, all the fuss about blessing sexual relationships? If a kangaroo and a silver medallion, why not a human relationship? The Church could bless homosexual relationships, heterosexual relationships, and an occasional ménage a trios if so requested. Certainly more deserving of a blessing than an overpass might be. The clergy need not inspect the integrity of any object of their blessing.**

**Some human pairings do manage mirabile dictu to remain sexually exclusive through long lifetimes, and such achievements never fail to inspire admiration. It seems to be a powerful human dream that once physically bonded with another we wish never again to be separated. By extension swans in the animal kingdom are also objects of admiration for their monogamous ways. (Recent research, however, has debunked the monogamous swan myth.) But for most people the monogamous dream is out of reach. More typical is the person who bonds sexually with several partners, finally settling on one in a relationship that may or may not be disrupted by divorce, and may or may not be affected by other sexual liaisons along the way. Persons in this latter group may indeed live lives as righteous and productive as those in the former. However, since medieval times Christianity has generally attempted to shame anyone whose life journey took them on this latter path.**

**The Episcopal bishops have done well to embrace homosexuals who bond in a sexually exclusive, life long commitment, but they have implicitly shamed all the rest of them. On balance the bishops' action will likely cause more grief than blessing. Some homosexuals will feel included, but most will be even more alienated than before.**

**The painful tragedy to all this is that the Christian churches have a limited measure of moral capital in these times, and they elect to squander it on such a futile and illusory pursuit. Thus they become increasingly irrelevant while the world around them, with an uncertain future, is deconstructing.**

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