‘Marriage is sacred’: The religious right’s arguments against ‘gay marriage’ in Australia

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Abstract

In 2004, the Australian government legislated to prohibit ‘gay marriage’; the religious right had lobbied vigorously for passage of this legislation. Drawing on Durkheim’s theory of sacred and profane, this paper examines the argument proffered by right-wing Christians that allowing legalised unions between lesbians and between gay men would seriously undermine the institution of marriage and the family. Claims about the spectre of gays and lesbians marrying reveal a deeper unease about the status of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family. These concerns, in turn, house a deeper unease about the nature and place of masculinity in contemporary Australian society. This disquiet about masculinity and masculine authority is isomorphic with concerns about challenges to the notion of an objective epistemological order. Marriage and nature are both sacred in Durkheimian terms because they must be radically separated from matters profane. By locating heterosexual marriage within the domain of nature, it is protected from contact with things that threaten its sacred status. However, Durkheim’s theory of the sacred is simultaneously an account of the exercise of ideological power. Attempts to cast heterosexual marriage as sacred and, therefore, as inviolate are inextricably linked with attempts to protect an epistemological order linked to masculine authority.

Résumé

En 2004, le gouvernement australien a légiféré pour interdire le «mariage gay»; la droite religieuse avait exercé un lobbying énergique pour que cette loi soit votée. En faisant appel à la théorie de Durkheim sur le sacré et le profane, cet article examine l’argument avancé par les chrétiens de droite, selon lequel légaliser les unions entre lesbiennes et entre hommes gay pourrait sérieusement anéantir l’institution du mariage et la famille. Les affirmations sur le spectre de gays et de lesbiennes pouvant se marier révèlent un malaise plus profond qui se rapporte au statut du mariage hétérosexuel et de la famille nucléaire. A leur tour, ces préoccupations englobent un malaise plus profond quant à la nature et à la place de la masculinité dans la société australienne contemporaine. Cette inquiétude à propos de la masculinité et de l’autorité masculine est isomorphe, avec des préoccupations relatives aux défis de la notion d’un ordre épistémologique objectif. Selon Durkheim, le mariage et la nature sont tous les deux sacrés parce qu’ils doivent être radicalement séparés des choses profanes. Positionner le mariage hétérosexuel dans le domaine de la nature le protège de tout contact avec ce qui menace son statut sacré. Cependant, la théorie du sacré de Durkheim est simultanément une illustration de l’exercice du pouvoir idéologique. Les tentatives de représentation du mariage hétérosexuel en tant que sacré et de ce fait, en tant qu’inviolable, sont inextricablement liées aux tentatives de protection d’un ordre épistémologique lié à l’autorité masculine.

Resumen

En 2004, el gobierno australiano prohibió legalmente los ‘matrimonios entre homosexuales’. El lobby del derecho religioso luchó energicamente para que se aprobara esta ley. Basándonos en la teoría de
Durkheim sobre lo sagrado y lo profano, en este ensayo examinamos el argumento defendido por la derecha cristiana que sostiene que si se legalizasen las uniones entre lesbianas y gays se socavaría gravemente la institución del matrimonio y de la familia. Las argumentaciones sobre la amenaza de los matrimonios de gays y lesbianas ponen de manifiesto un malestar más arraigado sobre el estatus del matrimonio heterosexual y la familia nuclear. Estas preocupaciones a su vez albergan un malestar más profundo sobre la naturaleza y el lugar de la masculinidad en la sociedad australiana contemporánea. Esta inquietud sobre la masculinidad y la autoridad masculina es isomorfa a las preocupaciones sobre los retos de la noción de un orden epistemológico objetivo. El matrimonio y la naturaleza son ambos sagrados en términos durkheimianos porque deben separarse radicalmente de los asuntos profanos. Al ubicar el matrimonio heterosexual en el dominio de lo natural, se protege del contacto con cosas que amenazan el estado sagrado. Sin embargo, la teoría de Durkheim sobre lo sagrado también ilustra cómo se ejerce el poder ideológico. Intentar situar el matrimonio heterosexual en la esfera sagrada y, por ende, como algo inviolable, tiene una relación inseparable con los intentos de proteger un orden epistemológico vinculado a la autoridad masculina.

**Keywords:** Australia, gays, lesbians, marriage, Durkheim, epistemology

**Introduction**

‘We believe that marriage is beautiful and sacred. It is the ultimate expression of a loving commitment between a man and a woman...for life...’ (National Marriage Coalition 2004: 2)

In 2004, the Australian Government passed legislation banning same-sex marriage. Australia’s Prime Minister — John Howard, a self-declared conservative — declared that marriage (between heterosexuals) is a ‘bedrock’ institution, deserving of legislative protection (Howard 2004). The religious right in Australia had played a key role in agitating for such legislation. In making sense of these moves, this paper does not analyse the political role played by this group in aiding passage of this legislation. Nor does it analyse the social and political factors that have given the Christian right an increasingly powerful voice in shaping legislation and public policy in Australia. Instead, the paper provides an exegesis of those arguments and outlines a theoretical framework in which they can be located and understood.

In its work, cited above, the National Marriage Coalition (NMC), ironically, expresses the argument of this paper; sociologically speaking, marriage is indeed sacred. I draw on Durkheim’s (1965) theory of the sacred to critically examine the religious right’s declaration that heterosexual marriage must be protected by demarcating it from same-sex unions. Durkheim observes that sacred phenomena must be set apart from things profane. However, sacredness is not an intrinsic quality. Anything can be sacred since sacred entities are merely a symbolic representation of cherished ideas and ideals, including systems of knowledge. Sacred things, ideas, places or persons thus have social authority; they specify social relationships, underpin and shore up social institutions and confer status and privilege. Because sacredness symbolizes deeply held values, relationships and institutions, it is ideological. Durkheim (1965: 356) is overt about this, recognizing that ‘...religious interests are the symbolic form of social and moral interests’. Like any theorist of ideology, however, Durkheim recognizes that ideology must be veiled. Setting sacred things apart protects their ideological function from scrutiny.

Because the religious right construes heterosexual marriage as sacred, it seeks to separate it and protect it from contact with profaning things threatening its sanctity. According to this reasoning, any attempt to re-define marriage to include recognition of relationships other than legally sanctioned heterosexual unions challenges their unimpeachable
demarcation from profane forms of sexual relationships, whether same-sex coupling or de-facto heterosexual partnering. To bring other forms of erotic and affective relationships into the same conceptual space as legally sanctioned heterosexual marriage is profoundly polluting and this explains the abhorrence that the spectre of gay marriage generates.

In Australia, the religious right has advanced a number of arguments to isolate legally sanctioned heterosexual relationships in an inviolate conceptual and social space. Firstly, heterosexual marriage is said to produce inter-personal and social benefits that other forms of coupling do not. Under its influence, men become faithful partners and active fathers, women are not abandoned by promiscuous, hedonistic men and children receive the socialization most likely to shape them into successful, responsible adults. At first sight, this defence of legalised heterosexual union appears to rest on a pragmatic defence of a beneficial social institution.

It is perhaps not surprising to find that this pragmatic defence of marriage masks a number of other concerns. Sacredness expresses and protects systems of knowledge, values and beliefs, as well as social relationships associated with them. The apparently rationalist defence of heterosexual marriage rests atop an ill-concealed unease about its apparently parlous state. Disquiet over marriage and the family in turn houses a deeper fear centred on the place of masculinity in contemporary Australia. Specifically, the arguments of the Christian right-wing are redolent with foreboding that masculinity is becoming redundant and that men are losing influence and authority. The perils of the fatherless family are, for example, a key plank of the right’s defence of heterosexual marriage (Muehlenberg 2003a, Horn 2003). Angst about the function and status of masculinity is isomorphic with profound anxiety about the erosion of the concept of objective knowledge.

Marriage, the voices of the NMC proclaim, is an objective — indeed ontological — phenomenon. Its meaning and its form are fixed and immutable. If the ontology and objectivity of marriage are challenged, intellectual and moral relativism are inevitable, leading to social anarchy, according to its ‘objectivist’ epistemological framework. The denial of an objective basis to the knowledge framing marriage and the family dilutes the authority of those who seek to protect and defend these institutions. The status of knowledge and the status of male authority are thus inseparable; epistemological challenges to objective knowledge are also an assault on male authority.

Nature and teleology

For the most part, the arguments advanced in NMC documents are not couched in overtly homophobic terms, though homophobia remains a powerful sub-text. The official rhetoric is that while homosexual behaviour must be condemned, homosexual people should be treated with compassion (Muehlenberg 2003a; van Gend 2004). Notwithstanding the mantle of compassion claimed by these polemicists, their writings are punctuated by pejorative terminology and dour judgment about gays and lesbians. Muehlenberg (2003b), while advocating compassion, happily labels gays and lesbians deviant and claims that they represent a social calamity.

What is overt in the NMC’s arguments is conscious and vigorous heteronormativity. According to its reasoning, heterosexuality is normative because it is the expression of ‘nature’. Nature, on this reading, is a code for an objective and immutable epistemological, moral and social order instituted by God. The writings of the NMC contain few references to the term ‘God’, however. Rather, the authority that underpins their claims is identified as
the ostensibly more objective, less-sectarian, entity nature. In the hands of the religious right, nature is inherently teleological. Nature not only reveals the basic design that shapes life, it is a template for knowledge, as well as for moral and, therefore, social order.  

Using language more suited to zoology than to human interaction, van Gend (2004), for instance, proclaims that ‘male-female pair bonding’ is a biological fact of life. The full fruits of this biologically ordained order are manifest in the heterosexual family, exhibiting, as it does, sexual ‘complementarity’ (Hafen 2000, Muehlenberg 2004, van Gend 2004). Women and men’s differing biology creates a highly functional psychological, emotional and social division of labour that, ostensibly, produces unique benefits for children. Women provide children with experiences and qualities men cannot, and vice versa. Put simply, men protect their families, while women nurture them (Hafen 2000: 6). Mothers and fathers have different attributes and so provide different, and complementary, dimensions to the socialization of children, who benefit by receiving the input of both a mother and a father. For instance, Horn (2003: 3) suggests:

‘Moms and Dads do things differently...fathers are much more likely to be physical with their children...Moms are much more likely to verbally stimulate their kids.’

Nature does not include same-sex relationships in its design and no biological imperative therefore exists for sex between women or between men, says van Gend (2004: 1). Accordingly, he contends that banning same-sex marriage is not excluding gay men and lesbians, since nature has not ordained their existence:

‘By its very nature, homosexuality has excluded itself; it has stepped out the circle of life — the timeless, endless natural circle of male and female...’

Van Gend further asserts that same-sex relationships do not offer the same benefits to children as those yielded by heterosexual ones. In his view, every:

‘...little mammal needs both the warmth and comfort of the mother, and playful rough and tumble, as well as the protection, of the father...No matter how competent and caring a lesbian partner may be, she can never be a Dad to a little boy. No little girl should be forced by the State to be without a mother, instead be made to look up and see two ‘married’ men playing Mummies and Daddies.’ (van Gend 2004: 1; emphasis in original)

But panic over the notion of gay and lesbian marriage masks a set of deeper concerns concerning marriage and the family. The rise in the number of people cohabiting rather than marrying, the advent of what it deems the ‘divorce culture’ and the apparent erosion of the very idea and ideal of marriage clearly unsettles the religious right (Whitehead 2001, Young and Nathanson 2003, Muehlenberg 2004). It is not just gay men, lesbians and others outside the sexual mainstream who threaten the status of marriage. ‘Irresponsible’, ‘hedonistic’ heterosexuals are also effacing the institution (Young and Nathanson 2003: 1). If gay men and lesbians should be locked outside the carrel of marriage, more heterosexuals ought to be shepherded into its confines, according to advocates of this perspective (Whitehead 2001, Muehlenberg 2003a, Young and Nathanson 2003). Heterosexuals, currently in de-facto unions, ought to be ‘encouraged’ to enter de-jure marriage. While legalised matrimony should be the norm for heterosexuals, non-heterosexuals should be denied entry to its fold.

Why is marriage, rather than de-facto heterosexual relationships, so essential? Marriage, so the argument goes, produces a range of benefits for spouses and children that ‘mere’
cohabitation does not (Horn 2003: 2–4, NMC 2004: 6–15). According to evidence marshalled by the NMC, children whose parents are married have fewer mental health problems, enjoy greater educational success and are more likely to form enduring relationships themselves than children who are the product of de-facto unions (Horn 2003, NMC 2004). Legal marriage is protective of children’s safety; rates of abuse and neglect, according to the NMC (2004: 15), are higher among children living in single parent families or blended families. Married couples are, generally speaking, better off financially than mere cohabiters (Hafen 2000, Horn 2003, NMC 2004). Moreover, individuals in married relationships, rather than mere de-facto unions, enjoy better physical and emotional health and exhibit lower rates of alcohol and substance abuse (NMC 2004: 10). Legally sanctioned marriage protects women’s safety; single and divorced women are at higher risk of violent crime, according to the NMC (2004: 14).

However, the benefit of formal marriage most strongly applauded by religious conservatives is that children in such unions are more likely to have better relationships with their fathers than those whose parents are unwed (Horn 2003, Muehlenberg 2003a, Young and Nathanson 2003, NMC 2004). According to Muehlenberg (2003a: 1) — a principal spokesperson for the NMC — fatherhood is a primary reason for the defence of marriage: ‘If you are concerned about the decline in fatherhood, you should be concerned about the decline of marriage’. This concern about the quality of men’s relationship with their children reveals a deep-seated unease about the existence of woman-headed households. The spectre of the fatherless family looms large in the lexicon of the religious right (Horn 2003, Muehlenberg 2003a, Young and Nathanson 2003). The problem, in Horn’s view, goes beyond the fact that large numbers of fathers have only intermittent contact with their children; the very idea of fatherhood itself is under threat. It is not just the presence of a father in a child’s household that is at issue, it is, in Horn’s view, a crisis in the whole notion of fatherhood. If a father dies, he is still present in a child’s life because the mother will invoke his memory in positive ways. When, however, men leave their partners and children images and memories of them are likely to be devalued or discarded:

‘It seems that children can survive the physical death of the father better than they can survive the death of the idea of the father.’ (Horn 2003: 2)

The absence of fathers from the lives of their children, according to authors such as Horn (2003) and Muehlenberg (2004), has particularly noxious consequences. Children lacking the active input of fathers are more likely to have mental health problems, to commit suicide, to indulge in drugs and alcohol, to drop out of school, to engage in criminal activities (among young men) or (for young women) to be sexually ‘promiscuous’ (Horn 2003: 1). Nature remains the consistently offered rationale underpinning the benefits accorded by active, involved fatherhood. Muehlenberg (2004: 8) approvingly cites an ‘authority’ that fatherhood is more than a mere biological role: ‘…fathers have always been considered by societies to be essential—and not just for their sperm’. Specifically, absent fathers do not bode well for children’s well-being and development. An intact marriage, with male and female parents, is necessary for the production of stable, sexually responsible young adults.

This concern for the well-being of fatherless children also, it turns out, expresses a concern about the status of contemporary masculinity. Unease over the fate of fatherless children is not gender neutral, it is centred, in fact, primarily on young men. In the words of Young and Nathanson (2003: 6):
‘The need for fathers is particularly acute for boys, moreover. Like girls, they must separate from
their mothers. Unlike girls, however, they must also switch the focus of their identity from one sex
to another.’

The precarious state of young men’s socialization is evident in one authority’s assessment of
how young men flounder in the absence of appropriate (read male) authority:

‘Biology, anthropology and history all tell the same story. Every society, each generation, faces an
invasion by barbarians...These barbarians are young men and boys, in their teens and early
twenties. If the truth be known, all too many of them are entirely unsuited for civilized life. Every
society must figure out ways to bring them into the disciplines and duties of young citizenship.’
(cited in Muehlenberg 2004: 8)

The preoccupation with fatherless families not only expresses disquiet over the masculinity of
fatherless sons, it contains a barely concealed fear about the prospect of men becoming
redundant in the eyes of women and society in general. The role of men, according to voices
in the religious right, is being devalued, if not discarded. The culprit in the declining fortunes
of men is women’s decreasing dependence on marriage. In Horn’s assessment, the advent of
birth control severed the once unassailable connection between sex and marriage; marriage
was no longer the only ticket of admission to sexual activity. In concert with this change:

‘...we see increasing numbers of women entering the paid labor force, which meant that they were
less dependent on marriage. All these social forces have combined to reduce fatherhood to a thin
shell of what it once was.’ (Horn 2003: 3)

The unarticulated logic of this assertion rests on the fear that women will only enter
marriage and value men if they are dependent on them. Giving women a modicum of
independence, according to this reasoning, will cause them to devalue and abandon men.
Men thus need marriage to give them a valued and valuable role in the lives of women. The
rise of the single parent family — often, as portentously noted, by choice — sends a message
‘...that men have no distinctive, necessary and publicly valued role in family life.’ (Young
and Nathanson 2003: 6)

Not only is matrimony the guarantee of men’s relevance to women, according to this
perspective, it is also the vehicle that provides men with a valued identity and social niche.
Young and Nathanson (2003) are overt about men’s need of marriage. Because of women’s
recent migration into the paid labour market, the ‘traditional’ roles of men — providers and
protectors — are no longer their exclusive domain. Marriage, therefore, gives men a healthy
identity. In Young and Nathanson’s words (2003: 2), marriage ‘...helps provide men with a
masculine identity...’ Hence men need marriage; particularly in instances where they have
few sources of identity or publicly valued role outside marriage (Young
and Nathanson 2003: 2). While the presence of men is essential to the healthy development of
children, particularly male ones, marriage, it turns out, it is also necessary for men’s well-
being. The ‘natural’ arrangement of the family confers advantages on all, according to
Muehlenberg, but he admits that men gain most:

‘All parties benefit, but men seem to benefit even more so. They live longer, healthier and happier
lives than do men in any non-married state.’ (Muehlenberg 2003a: 2)

But why should it be marriage, rather than mere cohabitation, that is necessary to give
fathers good relationships with their children? The answer again lies in biology. Marriage is
an indispensable element in the regulation of human sexuality and the restraint of sexual activity within prescribed regimens is, say Christian right-wingers, fundamental to social order (Young and Nathanson 2003: 1–2, Muehlenberg 2004). In Young’s and Nathanson’s (2003: 1; inclusions in original) opinion:

‘Much of what is accomplished in animals by nature (‘biology’, ‘genetics’ or ‘instinct’) must be accomplished in humans by culture (all other aspects of human existence, including marriage).’

However, this ostensibly gender-neutral regulation in fact relates almost exclusively to the need to regulate male sexuality. Nature has ‘...designed the mother-child bond to be quite strong’ (Muehlenberg 2003a: 1). Hence, women will ‘naturally’ stay with their children and with the men who father them. As construed by this world-view, men, however, are helpless dupes of deeply-ingrained, virtually irresistible biological impulses. Their biology pre-disposes them to not bond closely to their wives and their offspring, making them more likely than women to wander away from their families. Men, being naturally unsuited to fidelity and commitment, need the formal bond of matrimony to buckle them down to lasting relationships with their partners and children. Marriage, ‘...tames the male instinct to wander and stray...it helps tie men to their family’ (Muehlenberg 2003a: 2). He is blunt in his assessment of marriage’s function, ‘Wives and children help to domesticate men’ (Muehlenberg 2003: 2). Muehlenberg (2004: 8) approvingly cites Popeneo’s opinion that:

‘...biology was never enough to hold a father to the mother-child bond. That’s why every society has set up the institution of marriage...’

Hence, what seems on the surface to be a rationalist defence of marriage as a socially valuable institution turns out to house deeper fears about the status of masculinity. The argument that society needs marriage veils an assertion that men need marriage to save them from themselves. The defence of heterosexual marriage also houses a fear about the erosion of authority based on an objective, immutable and unchallengeable body of knowledge. The ‘battle’ over the right to define the nature of marriage and to participate in it is, it turns out, a manifestation of a more profound dispute between nominalist and realist accounts of knowledge.

Marriage: Nominalism and realism

In large part, the crisis of marriage and the family, bemoaned by Muehlenberg and others, involves more than just the decisions or desires of people who refuse to get, or to remain, married. It also centrally implicates the premises of accepted knowledge and, therefore, of authority and order. The conflict over marriage masks more sinister battle-lines between nominalists and realists, according to the Australian Family Association (AFA) (AFA: no date available). Members of the religious right take a realist view of knowledge, whereas ‘feminists’, ‘liberals’ and ‘the intelligentsia’ allegedly adopt a nominalist perspective. Realists ground authority and order in a body of knowledge that is objective because it is, putatively, not a human construct. Nominalists, on the other hand, do not recognize an external, objective epistemological order and, therefore, do not accord unquestioned legitimacy to the social order it ordains (AFA: no date available).

For realists, like Muehlenberg and his peers, marriage and the family exist as part of nature and this entity prescribes their form and function. The task for human beings is to
recognize and obey the laws governing marriage and the family. No culture, the argument continues, allows unregulated expression of sexuality and all cultures regard the family (in nuclear or extended form) as the institution responsible for the care and nurture of children. The ‘natural family’ (the phrase is Muehlenberg’s) has been the norm of human history and the institution of marriage has played a major role in this family structure (Muehlenberg 2004). In the eyes of Muehlenberg and his fellow-travelers, marriage is most emphatically not a social creation. The family is:

‘...one of the most basic and universal human institutions. And from a biblical point of view, it is one of the most crucial...It precedes the state and all other divinely ordained institutions.’
(Muehlenberg 2004: 1)

The religious right takes aim at ‘radical feminists’ and ‘the intelligentsia’ who, allegedly, argue that marriage is — that most baleful of concepts — a social construct (Muehlenberg 2004, van Gend 2004, Wyld 2004). Muehlenberg accuses feminists and the intelligentsia of being nominalists who deny a ‘naturally’ prescribed and fixed meaning to marriage. They are, charges Muehlenberg (2004: 2), involved in a ‘...concerted effort to undermine the family in terms of its historicity and its universality’. According to the AFA (no date available: 2), nominalists — whose ranks include the Supreme Court (in the USA) and the High Court (in Australia) — declare that marriage ‘...has no fixed meaning...Marriage is not a given reality but a fluid concept that we can expand, stretch or re-define as we please’.

Nominalism, according to realist prophets, sets us on a slippery slope. Once the concept of an objective body of knowledge is abandoned, relativism and social anarchy are at hand. Muehlenberg (no date available: 2) warns: ‘The truth is, all boundaries are smashed when we redefine marriage’. He prophesizes the depths to which society may descend if it moves away from a definition of marriage as legally recognized heterosexual union. Tripartite unions involving a bisexual who loves both a man and a woman would be possible (Muehlenberg no date available: 1, Wyld 2004). Group marriage is another potential outcome. The phantom of interspecies marriage is also held as a consequence of re-defining marriage (Muehlenberg no date available: 1–2; Wyld 2004). Little wonder that Muehlenberg (no date available: 2) approvingly cites another anonymous commentator who chides that: ‘Once marriage has been detached from the natural, complementary teleology of the sexes, it becomes nothing more than what each of us makes of it’.

The anarchy that will follow re-defining marriage also threatens the nation state. The dissipation of marriage would fatally undermine the integrity of ‘the family’ and, ultimately, the entire social fabric. Says Fowler (2004: 5), ‘The fate of nations hinges on its families. And the fate of families hinges on the honour and dignity accorded to marriage’. The logic of this position is parlous and is unsupported by empirical evidence. However, it is clear that right-wing Christians are fearful of the national consequences of broadening concepts of marriage and the family. And as Friedland (2002) notes, the claims of the religious right cannot be disentangled from nationalist anxiety.

Sacred, profane and the ontology of marriage

Why must the ontology and privilege of (heterosexual) marriage be so strenuously asserted and why must it be protected from things that hold no threat? In particular, why is legalised same-sex union construed as the ultimate menace, when it is ultimately the action of
heterosexuals that shapes the fortunes of marriage? In this respect at least, the religious
right is correct; marriage is sacred in the sense identified by Durkheim (1965: 55–56). The
sacred, in Durkheim’s famous definition, is ‘…par excellence that which the profane should
not touch, and cannot touch with impunity’. Sacred entities are forbidden and are hedged
in by interdictions preventing contact with profane things. To bring same-sex marriage into
the same conceptual space as heterosexual union is profoundly polluting because it
breaches the demarcation of sacred and profane.

The radical demarcation of sacred and profane is necessary because, as Douglas (1999:
xiv) argues, Durkheim’s theory of the sacred is a theory of how knowledge of the universe is
socially constructed. For Durkheim (1965: 269), sacred things embody ‘…collective ideals
which have fixed themselves on material objects’. Sacredness expresses the beliefs, values,
knowledge system and social relations of a given setting. The inviolability of sacred things
lies in their protection of systems of knowledge and the associated social order they
symbolically represent:

‘In addition to men (sic), society consecrates things, especially ideas. If a belief is unanimously is
shared by a people, then…it is forbidden to touch it, that is to say, to deny it or contest it. Now the
prohibition of criticism is an interdiction like the others and proves the presence of something
sacred.’ (Durkheim 1965: 244)

The known universe, as both Durkheim (1965) and Douglas point out (1999: xiv), is the
produce of human conventions and so also is the idea of God (or in this case ‘nature’) as its
ultimate point of appeal. In the case of the religious right’s excoriation of gay marriage,
nature becomes the ultimate domain of the sacred because it is a radically different entity
from humanly produced culture and, as such, can ostensibly be conceptually set apart from
the domain of human activity.

However, understanding of the constructed nature of the universe must be veiled. ‘We’
must believe some things — nature, God, rationality — have their origins outside and
beyond human agency, otherwise such concepts lost their sacred status and thus their social
power. Sacred ideas must be credited with an autonomous existence, otherwise they have
no coercive power and the social order they sustain becomes open to challenge. Sacredness
thus has two components. The first is that it has the status to command behaviour. As
Douglas (1999: 209) observes, things deemed beyond human agency are invoked when
people seek to control others:

‘Time, money, God, and nature…are universal trump cards plunked down to win an
argument…the ace card: “It’s against nature and what is more, your children will suffer”.’

Secondly, threatening sacred entities is believed to hold dangerous consequences. According to Douglas (1999: xiv), the sacred is:

‘...constructed by the efforts of individuals to live together in society and to bind themselves to
their agreed rules. It is characterized by the dangers alleged to follow upon breach of the rules.’

Hence, while at base the religious right’s claims are that marriage is necessary to save men
from themselves, what is invoked is the threat of inter-personal and social disorder should
the inviolability of marriage be breached. Left to their own devices, men will have sex with
women, fathering children they will unthinkingly abandon. The effects of this biologically
induced irresponsibility are manifold. Women are left, frequently in penury, to single-
handedly raise children and they, lacking paternal influence, suffer a range of
disadvantageous outcomes. This is particularly so for male children who are likely to revert to their natural barbarianism. Finally, men themselves suffer poorer physical and mental social health when they are not protected from themselves. Society and the nation are at risk from the legacy of a generation of fatherless children.

The sacred and pollution

Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and the profane helps explain why gays and lesbians are regarded by right-wing Christians as posing a greater threat to the institution of heterosexual marriage than ‘errant’ heterosexuals. This is because lesbians and gay men call into question the concept of a natural order. If the notion of natural order is open to scrutiny, so too are the configuration of relationships it allegedly decrees. Impugning the inevitability and naturalness of heterosexuality simultaneously impugns the natural and social order. This is why the religious right takes up the issue of nominalist and realist views of marriage with such fervour, defending realist views of marriage and the family against the profanity of nominalist ones.

The scenario of gay marriage is polluting for this framework, because it so deeply threatens their view of knowledge as an objective, immutable phenomenon that has the right and the capacity to script human behaviour. Threatening this view of knowledge shakes the social relationships with which it is associated. Muehlenberg (2003b: 1) therefore insists that he has no particular animus toward lesbians and gay men who ‘...simply want to be left alone, to live their lives quietly and peacefully’. It is the gay ‘lobby’ that perturbs and activates members of the religious right (Muehlenberg 2003b, Wyld 2004). The ‘lobby’, so feared and reviled by Muehlenberg and Wyld, refers to lesbians and gay men who refuse to be invisible, who resist discrimination, who claim civil rights and who, in so doing, challenge the unquestioned hegemony and therefore the sacredness of heterosexuality. Muehlenberg (Muehlenberg 2003b: 1) is clear that it is overt epistemological and, by extension, political challenge posed to heterosexuality that worries him:

‘The homosexual lobby...is militant, vocal and very public. It wants to promote the homosexual way of life as an equal alternative to heterosexual lifestyles. It is very aggressive, demanding that homosexual behaviour be embraced and accepted by the straight community, it publicly flaunts and promotes homosexuality...it is this militant lobby group that we are primarily concerned about when speaking about homosexuality. Most people do not mind the private, discreet activities of homosexuals...But most Australians do worry about the militant homosexual lobby and its never ending agenda of demands...’

It is not the private, invisible existence of non-heterosexuals that alarms Muehlenberg and peers — notwithstanding their conviction that ‘homosexuality’ is a disorder — it is their claim for marriage and other civil rights. Moral panic over the prospect of ‘gay marriage’ demonstrates the sacred status attributed to heterosexual marriage; threats to its unquestioned sovereignty are associated with the danger of moral pollution and social disorder. Bringing the idea of same-sex marriage into the same conceptual space as heterosexual matrimony represents an elemental form of pollution for the religious right; it is, from its point of view, unconscionable to define marriage as anything but heterosexual.

Moreover, the polluting potential of same-sex unions cannot be disentangled from the homophobia that underpins the panic of Christian right-wingers. The sexual activity of gay
men and, to some extent, lesbians is clearly disquieting. Muehlenberg (2003b: 2), for instance, cautions the unwary that the ‘gay lobby’ promotes same-sex unions as a human rights issue in an attempt to deflect attention from a focus on sexual behaviour. The implied, though unstated, logic is that if homosexual sex were the explicit object of focus most ‘normal’ people would be duly revolted. Nussbaum (2004) notes that the concept of disgust is enjoying a renaissance among some conservative commentators. Disgust, as Nussbaum observes, is ultimately focused on the body and its permeable boundaries. Not surprisingly, women’s bodies have frequently been its object. However, Nussbaum points out gay men are now the primary objects of disgust. The idea of anal sex, in particular, crystallizes male fear of penetration and of porous, fluid-leaking bodies that are subject to decay (Nussbaum 2004). However, even the concept of disgust is rendered sacred in this context. Rather than identify disgust as culturally contingent homophobia, those who justify its place in legal reasoning do so because it, in Nussbaum’s words, ‘…expresses a wisdom that lies deeper than mere convention’ (Nussbaum 2004: B6). The ‘truth’ of homophobic disgust, like the allegedly innate virtue of heterosexuality, is grounded in a reference point that is ostensibly beyond human agency.

Objectivist epistemology and anxiety

Durkheim’s words (1965: 55) on the chasm between sacred and profane encapsulate the sensibility of the religious right about the sacredness of heterosexual marriage:

‘Since the idea of the sacred is always and everywhere separated from the idea of the profane….the mind irresistibly refuses to allow the two corresponding things to be confounded, or even to be merely put in contact with each others; for such a promiscuity, or even too direct a contiguity would contradict too violently the dissociation of these ideas…’

The consequence of challenging the epistemological basis of marriage means that other things, which ‘should’ remain unexamined, also come under explicit scrutiny. The core of the right-wing argument about marriage is a thinly veiled plea by men of the religious right for something, or someone, to take responsibility for them; to, in effect, save them from themselves. Marriage is essential, they suggest, otherwise men will be left at the mercy of their capricious and destructive biological impulses.

Men’s vulnerability, however, cannot be openly stated; it, too, appears to be sacred. Instead, it is re-cast as the need to re-assert the fundamental authority of marriage that is grounded in nature. However, while sacredness may be ideological, threats to its inviolability never evoke merely cognitive responses. One of the strengths of Durkheim’s theory of sacred and profane (1965) is that he can show its ideological dimension while also apprehending its profoundly non-rational elements, in particular its capacity to generate emotions such as fear and disgust. In Douglas’ opinion (1999: 214), Durkheim’s theory of sacred and profane reveals that:

‘The deepest emotional investment of all is the assumption that there is a rule-obeying universe and that its rules are objective, independent of social validation. Hence the most odious pollutions are those threatening a system at its intellectual base.’

The religious right’s attempts to ground its values and beliefs in the ostensibly epistemologically unimpeachable ground of nature, which is also construed as a domain of unchallengeable neutrality, can be regarded as a symptom of deep anxiety. The dream of
certain knowledge, existing independently of human agency, has one of its primary advocates in Descartes. It is worth remembering that the Cartesian project of unassailable knowledge was born less out of a disinterested pursuit of knowledge than out of a desperate desire for certainty in the face of the chaos and conflict that characterized much of Europe in Descartes’ lifetime (Bordo 1987, Toulmin 1990).

The quest for knowledge that is ‘objectively true’ and therefore beyond dispute is an attempt to impose a kind of unity and order on experience that is inherently ambiguous and fluid. However, as Bordo (1987) notes, the attempt to create the kind of purity that is the inseparable companion of secure knowledge itself creates the category of the ‘impure’. In Bordo’s words:

‘The creation of a pure realm, untouched by uncertainty and risk, always necessitates...the designation of a contrasting impure realm to absorb or take responsibility for the messy aspects of experience.’ (1987: 76; emphasis in original)

In light of Bordo’s observation, it is not surprising that gay men and lesbians have been identified as particularly ‘impure’ and as posing a particular threat to social order. The existence of the sacred probably requires the existence of the profane; they are relational concepts, only acquiring meaning through their relationship with each other.

Durkheim’s theory is useful because it provides some insight into the function and power of sacredness and profanity, and their relationship with notions of pollution. These help account for the vehemence of the religious right’s response to gay marriage and why it regards it as so polluting and so dangerous. Durkheim’s (1965) and Douglas’s (1999) work strengthen the intellectual repertoire available to subject such practices to sociological analysis. In the present context, this task is both an intellectual and political necessity.

However, Durkheim (1965) and Douglas’s (1999) analyses can be criticized for providing a relatively static account of the ideological function of sacredness and profanity. Their works offer little insight into the specific social and political conditions that have helped shape the rise of the religious right in Australia, and elsewhere. Nor does a Durkheimian perspective by itself have much utility in elucidating the political processes that religious groups may employ in seeking to shape legislative and policy outcomes. As Stein (2005) points out, homophobia has multiple meanings and can be deployed in a variety of ways. It is unlikely that the need to assert the sacredness of legalised heterosexual marriage, for instance, would have arisen without the increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians in social life and of increasingly normalized representations of them in the Australian popular media (Stein 2005).

Additionally, the consternation over the ‘fatherless family’ cannot be disentangled from the attempt to re-define poverty as the outcome of individual choice (Cahill 2005: 170). Childhood poverty, unsatisfactory school outcomes and juvenile crime are increasingly attributed to the preponderance of female-headed households (Muehlenberg 2003a). Attributing such social problems to the erosion of stable, legally sanctioned marriage transforms them from structurally generated phenomena to the outcomes of decisions made by selfish, irresponsible individuals — notably women (Cahill 2005). Female-headed families thus become a point of confluence for male anxiety and neoliberal ideology, making them a powerful political scapegoat. So powerful were these factors in crystallizing anxiety about the state of heterosexual marriage and the family that the US passed the Defence of Marriage Act that not only attempted to strengthen the institution but went hand-in-hand with attempts to ‘reform’ social welfare (Cahill 2005).
Unease concerning women’s economic independence and ‘fatherless families’ cannot be dissociated from disquiet over masculinity. Changing employment profiles have diluted the power of white, working-class men in the Australian labour market, the domestic sphere and in the wider community, making them susceptible to right-wing political campaigns that are anti-feminist and homophobic (Stein 2005: 605). Conservative voices in Australia have railed against what they regard as the sidelining of masculinity. In the late 1990s, the socially conservative ‘One Nation’ party amplified a concern about the place of masculinity, rejecting gender-neutral language and taking aim at the single mother ‘industry’. Non-custodial parents (most frequently men) are, it claimed, often unfairly burdened by court-imposed financial demands. Pauline Hanson, one-time party leader, echoed a sentiment voiced in other quarters that men have suffered because of recent ‘feminist’ changes:

‘...the most downtrodden person in this country is the white Anglo-Saxon male...the balance has swung too far (in favour of women) and men don’t know what to do. “Gee, do I open up the door or don’t I?”’ (quoted in Curthoys and Johnson 1998: 102)

The refrain has continued unabated, though in more muted language. In the 2004 federal election, Mark Latham — then leader of the major opposition party — made a putative ‘crisis of masculinity’ central to his campaign. The current Prime Minister likewise warns against the catastrophic consequences of the absence of male role models in the lives of many young Australian boys (Greig 2004). While some elements of Australian society comment on the alleged devaluation of masculinity, the Christian right carefully avoids making it an overt focus. Its rhetoric is less an explicit critique of women’s recent socio-economic gains, or of the alleged erosion of masculinity alluded to by politicians, than it is a ‘defence of the family’. ‘Family values’, not gender wars, is the flagship of Christian conservatives. However, ‘family values’ is a code for the defence of masculine authority. Lakoff (2004) points out that fundamentalist Christianity is underpinned by a ‘strict father’ model. The patriarchal family is conceptualized as the basis of social relationships and, as such, male authority (deemed ‘headship’) is upheld as the basis of social order. Given the concerns held by some over the place of masculinity, the religious right’s concern to entrench the traditional family and so solidify male authority is not surprising. Nor, as Lakoff (2004) suggests, is the concern of right-wing Christians with gay unions puzzling; they are perceived as a threat to male authority founded on male headship of the family. This does not explain why a nation like Sweden, which provides a form of state sanction for same-sex unions, does not appear plagued by perceptions of a crisis of masculinity. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the particular socio-politico circumstances in which concern over masculinity fuses with right-wing Christian political activism. However, it may in part be that Swedish social policy has afforded economically vulnerable men some protection from the effects of economic globalization and economically rationalist policy that have shrunk many of their traditional sources of employment.

Further scholarship on the religious right would benefit by combining an account of the context in which it acquires power with an analysis of the way it mobilizes sacredness, profanity and pollution to shore up its position. Further analysis could also profitably explore in greater detail the relationship between objectivist epistemology and dominant versions of masculine identity, particularly in cross-cultural settings. In line with this, an anthropological revival of the study of kinship and its relationship to the control of women and children would be timely.

Crucially, the religious right is a phenomenon that is simultaneously political and religious. An adequate theoretical itinerary would consider the factors that shape its rise as a
political force and the way it operates in political and legislative processes. However, part of what gives the Christian right social and political power is its capacity to mobilize concepts of sacredness, profanity and pollution. That is, the symbolic classification systems employed within their world-view need to be identified. The relationship of these classifications to cultural values, dominant social relationships and epistemological debates are also a necessary part of the intellectual repertoire needed to adequately understand present day responses such as those analysed here.

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Notes

1. The phrase ‘Religious Right’ is part of the lingua franca of contemporary political discourse in Australia and North America. I define it as a social movement fuelled by a particular interpretation of Christian dogma, stressing the absolute authority of the Bible. Moreover, the movement tends to be fundamentalist in that it interprets the Bible literally and accepts that its dictums are immutable, iron-clad edicts for behaviour. The Christian right is also a political movement in that it is well organized, mobilized and is increasingly seeking and gaining power. In addition to its more strictly theological tenets, it shares many of the values of the political right, particularly hostility to multiculturalism, feminism, environmentalism, while resoundingly endorsing the notion of ‘small government’. The Australian lobby is in some respects merely a franchise of the North American movement. Many of the documents on the website of the Australian Family Association, and circulated by them as part of its lobbying, have their origins in the US and have simply been transplanted to Australia.

2. The contextual factors shaping the rise of the religious right are an important domain of inquiry but are beyond the scope of this paper, which examines the content of the materials used by the NMC as part of its lobbying. The NMC collated and disseminated information lauding the social benefits it claims are conferred by legalised heterosexual unions and fulminating about the menace it suggests is posed by legalised gay marriage. Allowing legalised same-sex unions will, it contends, fatally undermine the concept of marriage itself.

3. It should be noted that the version of nature advocated by this politico-religious stance omits the extensive and still accumulating evidence of same-sex activity and long term coupling among many animal species. See Roughgarden (2004) for a review of the evidence on this issue.

4. The refrain that marriage is good for men’s well-being has been a constant one in social science research since Durkheim’s (1975) *Suicide*. Muehlenberg (2003a) cites a raft of studies ostensibly proving that legal marriage provides men with a range of psycho-social and health benefits. Other evidence suggests that de-facto cohabitation, not merely legal marriage, has positive outcomes for men; see Lund et al (2002).

5. Five years of legalised non-heterosexual marriage in the Netherlands has not heralded the demise of heterosexual matrimony in line with the Jeremiad predictions of the religious right.

References


