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## **`Traditional Marriage' Isn't As Straightforward As All That**

By STEPHANIE COONTZ

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When Americans say "that's history," notes historian Alan Dawley, they usually mean that "you can forget about it." Unless, of course, they want to justify something by claiming that history "proves" that "it's always been this way." Such is the case of those who rely on "the lessons of history" to oppose same-sex marriage.

Claims of historical fact about marriage can be proved true or false, and three of the historical claims made by opponents of same-sex marriage in Connecticut are demonstrably untrue.

First is the claim that the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman goes back thousands of years. Second is the claim that the Judeo-Christian heritage has always seen marriage as a sacred relationship that must be defended above all others. Third is the claim that marriage has endured for thousands of years without change.

The most commonly approved form of marriage in the past (and the one mentioned most often in the first five books of the Old Testament) was polygamy - one man, many women. Some societies also countenanced polyandry - one woman married to several men. In China and parts of the Sudan, when two families wished to make an alliance but didn't have an eligible daughter or son still alive, marriages were often arranged between one child and the ghost of another. And at least one society, the Na of China, existed for thousands of years without marriage.

The Judeo-Christian tradition does not speak with one voice on marriage. Polygamy, divorce and concubines are all part of the Old Testament tradition. Jesus broke with older religious traditions in prohibiting divorce for men as well as for women. But in doing so, he also challenged the traditional right of a man to

take a second wife if the first wife was sterile. Ever since, the validity of a marriage in the Western tradition has not been dependent on ability to procreate.

And despite Jesus' rejection of divorce, Christianity did not sanctify marriage. (It wasn't made a sacrament until 1215). In fact, he urged his followers to remain unmarried or leave their families to go off and spread the Christian word.

His definition of family was based not on biological or legal ties but on the community of believers. When he was dying on the cross, he did not ask a disciple to help his mother. Instead, he called a disciple forward and said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son." And to the disciple, he said, "Here is your mother."

The claim that marriage existed unchanged for thousands of years is also false. Two hundred years ago, the generation that produced the Enlightenment and the American Revolution overturned thousands of years of tradition by insisting that the older generation must allow young people to choose their own mates on the basis of love rather than to further their parents' economic and political ambitions.

Even more radical and recent has been the innovation of giving wives and husbands equal rights in marriage. Until the late 19th century, a husband legally owned all his wife's property and earnings and could do with them what he pleased. He had the right to physically "correct" his wife and even imprison her in the home for disobedience.

When courts began to treat wives as separate legal entities with their own individual rights, defenders of "traditional" marriage predicted that such a radical social change would "destroy domestic tranquility" and subvert the "order of society."

Whether one is for or against legalizing same-sex marriage, we must understand that it is heterosexual couples who have been tampering with marriage for the past 200 years. Heterosexuals repealed the old laws mandating wives' subordination to husbands and prohibiting divorce. It was a lawsuit involving a heterosexual Connecticut couple that led the Supreme Court to overturn laws forbidding the sale of contraceptives, thus giving married people the right to decide not to have children.

Heterosexuals also pioneered assisted reproduction, allowing couples who cannot have children to become parents anyway. And it was heterosexuals who repealed the legal definition of marriage as the union of a husband who must play one role in the home and a wife who must play a different one.

Until the 1980s, courts said that the husband must support the family; the wife had no such duty. Wives were charged with keeping house, rearing children and providing other personal services. That is why a man could not be charged with marital rape and a woman could not sue for loss of personal services in the event of her husband's death. Only in the 1980s did courts redefine marriage as a union of two people with reciprocal, not complementary, duties.

Once marriage came to be seen as an institution bringing together two individuals based on mutual affection and equality, without regard to rigidly defined gender roles or the ability to procreate, it's not surprising that gays and lesbians said, "That now describes our relationships too, so why can't we marry?" If you don't like these changes in the institution, blame your grandparents, not the gay and lesbian couples seeking entry into this new model of marriage.

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