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What's the Battle Over Gay Marriage Really About?

The June 19, 2005 cover story of The New York Times Magazine is entitled, "What's the Movement to Outlaw Gay Marriage Really About?" The article deserves significant attention. Interest is likely to be sparked by a line printed on the cover just under the article's title. That line suggests that the battle to outlaw gay marriage is "not just about marriage." Of course, that statement is profoundly true—and that's what makes the article interesting.

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America's dominant media culture can lay claim on a universe of influential media, but *The New York Times Magazine* is one of the most strategic venues in elite publishing. A cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* sends a powerful cultural signal.

Thus, Russell Shorto's June 19, 2005 cover story in the magazine, "What's the Movement to Outlaw Gay Marriage Really About?," deserves significant attention. Interest in the article is likely to be sparked by a line printed on the cover just under the article's title. That line suggests that the battle to outlaw gay marriage is "not just about marriage." Of course, that statement is profoundly true—and that's what makes Shorto's article interesting.

Shorto's specific focus is on the state of Maryland, and he profiles advocates and opponents of gay marriage operating within that state. Nevertheless, Shorto's first stop on his journey to understand the controversy over gay marriage is a "small but grandiose building at the corner of Eighth and G Streets Northwest in Washington," the headquarters of the Family Research Council [FRC]. Shorto begins his article there, describing the majestic traditionalism of the FRC headquarters in terms of "architectural signals of tradition and power." He takes his readers immediately to a large window case in the FRC headquarters focused on the meaning of marriage. The case features a statement reciting verses from Genesis 2, where God creates woman and the institution of marriage. Accompanying the biblical text is a collection of wedding artifacts collected from FRC staff members. Old photographs, a wedding dress, and other wedding paraphernalia communicate a vision of heterosexual marriage as an institution of enduring strength. Of course, the background to Shorto's article is a sense of more recent vulnerability.

As Shorto explains, "This shrine to marriage as a heterosexual, Judeo-Christian institution is a totem of conservative Christianity's mighty political wing and a flag marking its territorial gains in what its leaders see as a decisive battle in the culture war." He goes on to explain the development of the "Arlington Group," a coalition of over 20 conservative organizations, committed to the protection of marriage as a heterosexual institution and the defeat of all efforts to normalize same-sex "marriage."

Shorto argues that, even as the Arlington Group was formed in May 2003, a "one-two punch" of historical developments was in the making. First came the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the case, *Lawrence v. Texas*, striking down all laws against homosexual behavior. Within months the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court would mandate same-sex marriage in that state, and San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsome would begin handing out same-sex marriage licenses from City Hall. Shorto sees this as the defining moment in America's culture war: "The nebulous culture war instantly focused into a single issue." From there, Shorto's article is, in turns, interesting and infuriating. For one thing, Shorto doesn't seem to be able to convince himself that Americans are decisively opposed to homosexual marriage. In one statement, he will concede that "the country is fairly decisively opposed to it." Yet, looking back to the wedding display at the FRC headquarters, Shorto described the exhibit as "a cultural litmus test." As he explained, "Perhaps half the population would see the disembodied wedding outfits preserved in glass cases and guarded by a wooden eagle as bizarre, even lurid, while for the other half the display would trip different signifiers: sanctity, defiance, determination. On so many fronts that is where we are as a nation these days: divided, clearly and seemingly unbridgeably, in sensibility,

value, foundations, even a sense of humor.”

Are we really to believe that “perhaps half the population” would find a display of traditional wedding paraphernalia to be bizarre or “even lurid?”

Shorto is a gifted writer, and his recent history of Dutch New York, *The Island at the Center of the World*, is a fascinating and informative work of popular history. Nevertheless, he seems genuinely perplexed about conservative opposition to homosexual marriage. To give him credit, he appears to be working hard to understand.

As Shorto explains, cultural conservatives “have their own reasons” for opposing same-sex marriage. These reasons “are based on their reading of the Bible, their views about both homosexuality and the institution of marriage and the political force behind the issue.” He cites FRC founder Gary Bauer, now president of a group called “American Values,” to the effect that same-sex marriage is “the new abortion.” As Shorto explains, Bauer means that, as with abortion, conservatives see gay marriage as a culture-altering change being implemented by judicial fiat.” Without doubt, this is certainly true.

America is in a season of transition and uncertainty on issues of homosexuality, Shorto seems to imply. While he sees much of America looking toward homosexuality in a more positive light, conservative Christians seem to be unwilling to go along. Shorto seems to be particularly interested in the fact that, for Christians, *homosexuality* seems to be the crucial issue.

As he explains, “for the anti-gay-marriage activist, homosexuality is something to be fought, not tolerated or respected. I found no one among the people on the ground who are leading the anti-gay-marriage cause who said in essence: ‘I have nothing against homosexuality. I just don’t believe gays should be allowed to marry.’ Rather, their passion comes from their conviction that homosexuality is a sin, is immoral, harms children and spreads disease. Not only that, but they see homosexuality itself as a kind of disease, one that afflicts not only individuals but also society at large and that shares one of the prominent features of a disease: it seeks to spread itself.”

In order to understand how persons could come to such a conclusion, Shorto traveled to Catonsville, Maryland, a suburb of Baltimore. He introduces us to Dave and Laura Clark, who live in that suburb with their four children in a home that “is tucked cozily into the back of a cul-de-sac in a 1970s housing development.” Dave Clark works for the federal government while Laura home-schools their seven-year-old twins and takes care of their two younger children. As Shorto explains, a conversation in the Clark home is “decidedly kid-centric.” Even as a wedding album is displayed prominently in the Clark home, the issue of marriage has come to be front-and-center in the family’s consciousness. The Massachusetts court decision mandating same-sex marriage became something of a catalyst in the Clark household, and Laura Clark now spends a considerable amount of her time as an activist on the issue.

“The gay activists are trying to redefine what marriage has been basically since the beginning of time and on every continent,” Laura Clark explained. “My concern is for the children—for the future.”

Shorto argues that Laura Clark “could be considered a power center for the opposition to gay marriage because the energy, zeal and legwork on that side come from people like her.” Even as opponents of same-sex marriage push for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Shorto argues that the real action is at the state level, which he explains as “actually a series of games, each with its own dynamic.”

Beyond the politics, Shorto sees something else as the motivating factor. “Those at the center of the opposition are, almost to a person, motivated by their brand of Christian beliefs. That was apparent in conversations I had with activists around Maryland and in several other states, and it was much in evidence at a dinner that Laura Clark arranged for my benefit, to which she had invited six friends who were active in the cause, all of whom were eager to explain what drives them,” Shorto relates.

The reporter also introduces us to Brian Racer, the Clark family’s pastor, who preaches a clear message that homosexuality is a sin and that marriage is an unchangeably heterosexual institution. Shorto traces opposition to same-sex marriage—and opposition to homosexuality itself—to churches and to pastors like Brian Racer, who opposed a “value-neutral” approach to homosexuality. As Shorto puts it: “To the conservative Christian activist, homosexuality is anything but value-neutral.”

On the other side of the divide, Shorto introduces us to Lisa Polyak and Jita Deane, a lesbian couple who have lived together for more than 20 years and now have two daughters. As Shorto explains, “Polyak and Deane each became pregnant by artificial insemination, with sperm from a cryolab.” In the article, we discover that Deane “works part time as a learning specialist at Goucher College,” while Polyak “is an environmental engineer for the U.S. Army.” Shorto reports that, as with the Clark family, “church is important” in the Polyak-Deane household. Beyond this, Shorto makes his evaluation clear: “If the Clarks are a picture-perfect suburban family, this one is, in many ways, the urban equivalent.” As he concedes, “The difference, of course, is that Polyak and Deane are both women.”

Even as Laura Clark did not set out to be an activist on the issue, Shorto explains that Polyak and Deane found themselves in a similar quandary, and only recently have been activated as advocates for same-sex marriage.

Clearly, Shorto believes that, as more Americans become familiar with households like the Polyak-Deane home, opposition to same-sex marriage will fall away. “If you are one of the many millions of people who are vaguely opposed to gay marriage—who perhaps have no problem with homosexuality but also think marriage is simply a uniquely a male-female enterprise—sitting in Polyak and Deane’s living room might put that notion to the test,” he asserts.

Why won’t conservative Christians go along? As Shorto tries to explain, “For them, the issue isn’t one of civil rights, because the term implies something inherent in the individual—being black, say, or a woman—and they deny that homosexuality is inherent. It can’t be, because that would mean God had created some people who are damned from birth, morally blackened. This issue really is the inescapable root of the whole issue, the key to understanding those working against gay marriage as well as the engine driving their vehicle in the larger culture war: the commitment, on the part of a growing number of people, to a variety of religious belief that is so thoroughgoing it permeates every facet of life and thought, that rejects the secular, pluralistic grounding of society and that answers all questions internally.”

There we face an inescapable observation. Mr. Shorto is obviously surprised to find a large number of Christians who hold “to a variety of religious belief that is so thoroughgoing it permeates every facet of life and thought.” As he sees it, such a thoroughgoing faith “rejects the secular, pluralistic grounding of society.”

Sadly enough, this is what we should now expect from the secular press. Those writing for elite publications such as *The New York Times Magazine* must, we can only assume, be far more familiar with the accommodationist postures of liberal Protestantism. To this group of secular journalists, evangelical Christianity seems both bizarre and threatening.

Shorto should be credited with an article that is, in the main, both informative and insightful. Nevertheless, his crude attempt to discredit conservative Christians by sending unambiguous cultural signals is inexcusable. When he describes the home of Laura and Dave Clark, he not only describes the house as “tucked cozily into the back of a cul-de-sac in a 1970’s housing development,” he also describes it as basically tacky, featuring wall-to-wall carpeting “and hand-me-down furnishings.” The Polyak-Deane home, by contrast, is described as a “quaint house” with “white-painted brick” and a picket fence. Furthermore, the home’s “hardwood floors are covered with Oriental rugs.” Mr. Shorto could just as easily have featured a conservative activist from the same neighborhood or, more to the point, he could have resisted the urge to signal his elite readership that the conservative activist can be dismissed as culturally out of touch.

Russell Shorto was certainly right about one thing—the battle over gay marriage is not just about marriage. We are witnessing the clash of two diametrically opposed worldviews—two absolutely different ways of understanding the world. Mr. Shorto’s article will inform his readers by helping them to understand how conservative Christians think. To an equal and unintentional extent, his article also tells us a great deal about how he and his colleagues think. Hint—it’s not just about marriage.

