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Roundtable explores gay civil marriage proposal

Jerry Filteau | Aug. 4, 2009

WASHINGTON -- A prominent Baptist minister?s proposal to accept same-sex marriage as a civil right across the United States provoked strong reactions at a July 29 roundtable for journalists.

The Rev. Welton Gaddy, pastor of Northminster Church in Monroe, La., and president of the Interfaith Alliance, a 150,000-member national nonpartisan organization, presented the proposal as a framework for the roundtable discussion. It was held at the National Press Club in Washington and sponsored by Religion News Service as one of several events marking RNS?s 75th anniversary.

RNS editor Kevin Eckstrom, moderator of the discussion, noted that civil same-sex marriage is ?one of the hottest issues of our time.?

Gaddy argued that legal civil recognition of same-sex marriage would not infringe on religious liberty if the legislation guaranteed the freedom of religious bodies to define marriage as heterosexual within their own ranks. A recent white paper he wrote detailing that argument was made available beforehand to other panelists and to the religion journalists invited to participate. It is available on the Web at www.interfaithalliance.org/equality/read.

The other panelists disagreed with Gaddy, two of them quite sharply, for a variety of reasons.

Maggie Gallagher, president of the National Organization for Marriage and the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, cited the example of Catholic Charities of the Boston archdiocese being forced to stop providing adoption services because state anti-discrimination laws on sexual orientation required the agency to give equal consideration to same-sex couples in evaluating potential adoptive parents.

She also cited a Methodist church in New Jersey that had to ban all weddings at its popular beachfront pavilion or lose its tax-exempt status if it wanted to continue excluding gay ceremonies.

Gaddy?s proposal ?will not convey the cultural meaning of marriage,? Gallagher said. Rather, ?it will use the power of law to take the cultural meanings of marriage, which were not created primarily by government, and will try to change the culture, so that same-sex unions and opposite-sex unions are deemed the same.?

?If you go back to the history of marriage, it is very clear -- marriage has a core public purpose. ... Marriage is about bringing together male and female because these are the only kinds of sexual unions that can both create new lives and connect those children to their mother and father,? she said.

?Changing the law of marriage will change that,? she added. ?This purpose of marriage will not only be privatized; it will be stigmatized.?

She rejected the civil rights analogy of racial discrimination used by gay marriage activists.

?When religious liberty comes up to racial discrimination, it?s a well-established principle of law that religious liberty loses,? she said. ?We do not give special exemptions to people who discriminate on the basis of race because they have religious scruples.

?What we really have is a church-state conflict,? Gallagher said. ?If the law adopts a definition of marriage that is fundamentally at odds with a large religious tradition in this country, it?s going to be a large number of religious people who cannot adapt to the government?s definition who are going to feel oppressed and have their liberties curtailed.?

Gaddy, a 20-year member of the World Baptist Alliance?s Commission on Christian Ethics, said he first tried to draw a distinction between government-sanctioned civil unions and church-sanctioned marriages, which would also be recognized by the government as civil unions, with civil unions as the key to civil legal benefits and obligations.

But he realized that in that construct, ?marriage by weight is always going to carry more force, and whether it was a heterosexual relationship or a same-gender relationship, you would have those married really considered more united than those in a civil union,? he said.

?The challenge to marriage these days is not coming from the gay community; it is coming from the younger generation of Americans who are heterosexual, who are living together without benefit of marriage and clergy,? said another panelist, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the North American organization of Conservative rabbis.

He said that in Jewish religious tradition ?family is central; it?s a core element in religious thinking? but Jewish teaching on both marriage and family has changed over the centuries.

Asked later to elaborate on that, he pointed out that polygamy was once acceptable in Judaism and was not outlawed until the 10th century of the common era, and that biblical language on marriage speaks of a man ?acquiring? a wife -- a unilateral transaction similar to acquiring property -- as opposed to present-day Jewish thought that views marriage in terms of mutuality.

Panelist Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council and a former member of the Louisiana Legislature, said that marriage ?is not solely a religious institution nor is it solely a civil one, but it has great civil benefits.?

Perkins said studies have shown a correlation between marriage breakdown and numerous social ills, from crime statistics to unwed motherhood to social welfare recipients.

?There is a civil interest in marriage. It?s fundamental for a strong society,? he said.

On the power of law and public policy to shape societal attitudes, he cited no-fault divorce -- inaugurated in California in 1969 under then-Gov. Ronald Reagan and subsequently spread nationwide -- as a social force that ?watered down what the meaning of marriage is,? raised divorce rates and, ?I would argue, was one of the leading factors leading to a tremendous rise in cohabitation.?

He said redefining marriage to include same-sex couples ?will be the death knell of marriage, both from the civil standpoint and from the religious standpoint.?

Jerry Filteau is NCR *Washington correspondent.*

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