

The Married State

By Christopher Hitchens

I shall not soon forget an evening I had with my friend Andrew Sullivan, the most eloquent of the gay conservatives, about a decade ago. The issue of homosexual marriage was then just beginning to stir. Look, Andrew, I said in effect, are you sure about this? We've just reached a point where America is more open to, and more reconciled with, its gay citizens than any society in history. The AIDS crisis didn't lead to panic or quarantine. Gay-bashing politicians have learned that the tactic rebounds on them. The armed forces are at least willing to compromise, and might have gone further than that if not for Bill Clinton's cowardice. And, just at this moment, you want to increase the stakes and demand not just equal rights but identical rights, in an area where the mainstream already feels vulnerable. I may have added something flippant about the idea of marriage somehow missing the point of being gay. (In other words, glad as I am not to be gay, if I *were* I would think, well, at least I don't have to go through all that.)

It was as well for me that this discussion took place at my own dining-room table. Make no mistake: This is an argument about the socialization of homosexuality, not the homosexualization of society. It demonstrates the spread of conservatism, not radicalism, among gays. For the infuriated Andrew, it became clear, the achievement of the married state was the consummation (all right, excuse the expression) and not the overstatement, of the advances in recognition that had already been won. As to my second point, or observation, how dare I imply that the gay state was somehow promiscuous or irresponsible?

Well, I do know how I had allowed myself to run away with that last idea, but on reflection this had been largely an aspect of my identification of homosexual life with youthful narcissism and had little bearing on the choices being made by, or offered to, people of my now advanced age. What do I really know about this, when I ask myself? I know that homosexuality is innate in our species, and perhaps in other species also, and thus that it is nonsense to speak of it as an offense to "nature," and nonsense on stilts to speak of it as an offense to any presumable Creator (belief in whose intentions is Andrew's problem and not mine). I know that homosexuality is a form of love, not just a form of sex, and thus that it deserves respect if not reverence. I know that our theocratic enemies are, and that our former totalitarian enemies were, ugly and paranoid on the point.

I also know many "married" homosexual couples, either from life or from literature. Thekla Clark's beautiful profile of her friends W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman ("Wystan and Chester") is indeed a portrait of a marriage: full of storms and miseries but undoubtedly both a stable life-relationship in itself, and a bulwark for other heterosexual couples: godsons and goddaughters, adopted "nephews" and "nieces." Gore Vidal and Howard Austen had played the same role in the lives of many of their friends, and of their friends' children, even if Gore himself still has aesthetic and philosophical objections to being defined as gay, and even if I suspect Auden would have felt somewhat absurd declaring that he was married.

So, even if I did not feel much more strongly about an unmolested Constitution than I do about most things, I would first have to answer the question: How do gay marriages threaten or challenge heterosexual ones? And with this comes another question: Why are the advocates of the one and only and immemorial man-woman marriage apparently so chronically insecure? On the same floor as the Hitchens family live two chaps, who are as clearly spliced as any couple I know. They hold responsible Washington jobs, they take an interest in the civic health of the city, and they help raise the children of a previous marriage into which one of them had entered. (Never forget, by the way, the forgotten hell that was the consequence of pressure for gay people to try to marry heterosexuals and make a go of things.)

In any domestic emergency involving my wife or daughter, I would probably turn first to these neighbors. The only discomfiting thing I find about their domestic arrangements is their practice of clasping hands for grace before meals. I can't make myself feel that my own marriage is undermined, or rather would be undermined, if they could legally tie the knot. Would I dance at their wedding? Undoubtedly, and always assuming I would be asked. Would my tenderly nurtured daughter go into shock? I can't see it happening.

On the other hand, if Charlize Theron and her beau were to wed and to move in next door, neither I nor my

wife (assuming that the beau is the one pictured at the Oscars) would have complete peace of mind. Indeed, the Ten Commandments specifically caution me only against other heterosexual marriages. I say they warn me, because these injunctions only bother to warn men against coveting their neighbor's wives, or indeed any other of his animals or chattels. If this is all that god understands about the human nature he is said to have set in motion, we may all hope to slip by.

I share many of the misgivings that are expressed about opportunistic grandstanding by judges or mayors, but surely this problem, and not sexuality, ought to be the province of constitutional law. The Texas sodomy statute, for example, should have been struck down or repealed not as a "rights" or "equal protection" matter, but because it was an attempt to instate the teachings of a book that not all of us regard as holy, and to make an establishment of religion. Nothing can possibly violate the letter and spirit of the Constitution more than that.

When I become bored or irritated by the gay marriage battle—and I do, I sometimes do—I like to picture the writhing faces and hoarse yells of the mullahs and the fanatics. Godless hedonistic America, not content with allowing divorce and pornography, has taken from us our holy Taliban and our upright Saddam. It sends Jews and unveiled female soldiers to our lands, and soon unnatural brotherhood will be in the armed forces of the infidels. And now the godless have an election where all they discuss is the weddings of men to men and women to women! And then I relax, and smile, and ask my neighbors over, to repay the many drinks and kind gestures that I owe them.

Mr. Hitchens is a columnist for *Vanity Fair*. His book "Thomas Jefferson" is forthcoming in the "Eminent Lives" series, from HarperCollins.



W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman—at home.