

Review of Pamela Dickey Young, *Religion, Sex and Politics: Christian Churches and Same-Sex Marriage in Canada*, Black Point NS: Fernwood Publishing 2012, 144 pp., ISBN 978-1-55266-523-7

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Over the past decade same-sex marriage seems to have become the hallmark of gay and lesbian emancipation. From its introduction in European countries such as the Netherlands (2001), Spain, (2005) and France (2013) as well as several states in the United States it has become clear that religious communities tend to play an important role in the public debates on same-sex marriage. Changing the law in such a way that gay and lesbian couples, too, can get married inevitably leads to discussions about the relationship between State and Church, the relationship between freedom of religion and civil rights for sexual minorities, the nature of marriage and the extent to which marriage is historically and culturally defined as an inherently religious institution. In 2005 Canada was the fourth country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage. Pamela Dickey Young explores the ways in which in Canada religion, sexuality and public policy intersect in the debates that preceded the introduction, focusing especially on the role of Christian churches.

Dickey Young starts out by mapping very briefly the events that lead to the introduction of same-sex marriage in Canada and then goes on to explain the methodology and theoretical framework. Methodologically, the book offers a textual analysis of official pronouncements from Canada's main church denominations and its legal courts. It does so by defining important concepts such as sex, gender and religion from post-structuralist perspectives (Butler, Halperin). Dickey Young stresses that not only sex and gender, but religion, too, are socially constructed, that their meanings are fluid and change over time due to changes in the cultural contexts within which they are defined. The theoretical tools for analyzing the role of religion in public debate are offered by political scientist Avigail Eisenberg, stating that the 'hierarchy of rights' (of sexual minorities and

religious groups) is the main issue at stake in the debate. The book then successively discusses how sexuality has historically been defined in Christian churches (Chapter 2), the ways in which marriage and Christianity became tied together (Chapter 3) and Christian views on same-sex marriage in Canada (Chapter 4). An analysis of the arguments put forward by churches (Chapter 5) and of the responses by the courts (Chapter 6) follows. The book concludes with a broad analysis of the debate, asking questions about power-relations that were at stake in the discussions.

The introductory chapters of the book outline the relation between Christianity, sexuality and marriage in a general manner, continuously followed by a description of the Canadian situation. Dickey Young describes the Christian attitude towards sexuality as historically one of fear and desire to restrict it within well-defined boundaries. The attitude towards homosexuality has been one of rejection, showing simultaneously that within Christianity homosexual behaviour was being disciplined and that it did in fact occur. The historical summing-up of events postulated to prove the latter statement is rather limited, moving from Augustine through medieval Europe to nineteenth century Britain with a stroke of the pen. A more elaborate description of contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality from Christian churches follows, exposing the diversity in Christianity in present-day Canada. A concise description of the history of marriage shows that the meaning of marriage and the extent to which it has been institutionalized and connected to church practice has changed over time. This leads Dickey Young to conclude that although some Christian churches may like to claim that the institution of marriage has Christian roots, marriage preceded Christianity and has only relatively recently been explicitly linked to religion.

Dickey Young then zooms in on the arguments that were used by churches in Canada to either oppose or advocate same-sex marriage. Dickey Young structures the oppositional argumentation within five categories (such as arguments based on theology, biology and the historical involvement of churches in conducting marriages). Arguments in favor are structured in six categories, some of which (such as theology) overlap with the con-argumentation. The categorization is very helpful in gaining a first understanding of an extremely complicated debate in which many voices participate. An analysis of the pro and con argumentation then follows in the next chapter.

As it turns out, theology hardly ever constitutes churches' main argumentation, as most of them try to compel to a large audience, whether religious or secular. Churches opposed to same-sex marriage instead turn to universalistic claims about the fixed nature of marriage as protecting the heterosexual nuclear family, the complementarity of men and women and the purpose of procreation. Churches in favor will stress the changing nature of marriage and define relationships more in terms of love and loyalty rather than the biological possibility to have offspring – closer to the principles of social constructivism which were laid out as the book's theoretical framework.

From the analysis of the juridical response to religious claims regarding marriage we learn that many courts view religion as an individual trait related to personal spirituality, rather than imbedded in communities. Dickey Young wonders whether such a narrow understanding of religion does justice to religious contributions to the debate. Borrowing from Jürgen Habermas, Jeffrey Stout and aforementioned Avigail Eisenberg she gives some strategic suggestions

that may enhance a more thorough engagement with religious argumentation in the public arena.

The debate about same-sex marriage, Dickey Young notes in the final chapter, is actually about sex: what does it mean, who decides who can 'have' it, and with whom? Power is an important factor to take into account here, revealing itself both in traditional Christian discourse disciplining its members into conformity as well as in the dominance of secular thought in public spaces. Within the power-play over the right definition of sexuality, more critical approaches to categories of sex, sexuality and gender are lost. In the public debate monogamy is not questioned, nor is the option of alternative family forms discussed in much detail. Moreover, Dickey Young notes the absence of a critical evaluation of the normative effects the introduction of same-sex marriage might have on gay and lesbian communities. Who guarantees that the 'you may kiss the bride' will not end up in a 'you *should* kiss the bride'?

The goal of *Religion, Sex and Politics*, to disentangle the way in which religion, sexuality and public policy intersect in debates about same-sex marriage, is an ambitious one. For one, the religious diversity in Canada is impressive, with many different churches and individual Christians raising their voice. Dickey Young has managed this challenge very well. She has gone to great lengths to represent as adequately as possible the many participants, both religious and secular, in the debate. The reader is thus offered material from a very broad range of perspectives and will in most cases accept into the bargain enumerations like '[t]he Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada made representations to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Status of Disabled Persons in 1996, and the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in 2000, opposing the extension of rights and benefits to same-sex individuals and couples' (p. 55). A second challenge lies in the methodological and theoretical assumptions. The social constructivist framework that is used to dissect truth claims is in itself ideologically charged in that it favors fluidity and the disruption of fixed categories. This requires 'fair play' on the side of the researcher and hesitation to jump to easy conclusions regarding traditional discourses. Dickey Young however avoids on most occasions the pitfall of siding too easily with the advocates of same-sex marriage. She raises important questions as to the ways in which representatives of secular institutions and the media might engage more in-depth with religiously motivated argumentation, hoping for more space for these arguments in public debates. A little troubling though are references to the common views of the Canadian people who in Dickey Young's writings sometimes figure as an imagined 'we' she identifies with; a 'we' supportive of pro same-sex marriage argumentation and representative of 'the' Canadian take on matters. Dickey Young for instance suggests that '[a]s we see in various places in the world today, religion is asserting itself politically in ways that we would not find palatable in Canada' (p. 122). Such claims to a general view of the Canadian people somewhat downplay the otherwise careful analyses which are attentive to the diversity among Canadians.

Religion, Sex and Politics is a useful contribution to studies on the rhetoric of religion and homosexuality. It urges further pondering of important questions regarding the translation of social constructivist critical thinking into public debates, the meaning of religious citizenship and the discursive space 'granted' to religious argumentation. Debates on same-sex marriage are, as

recent developments in France show, ongoing and probably will be for some time to come. Scholars in other national contexts will benefit from Pamela Dickey Young's thorough analysis of the Canadian context and will find her results thought-provoking and stimulating.