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Nuptial symbolics beyond the law: constructions of religion and sexuality in debates on the legalization of same-sex marriage

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Since the turn of the century, a growing number of (Western) states have legalized same-sex marriage (e.g. the Netherlands 2001, Belgium 2003, Spain 2005, Canada 2005, South Africa 2006, Sweden 2009, France 2013) or are about to do so. The intense public debates that often precede – and sometimes follow – these processes indicate that this is not merely an issue of granting equal rights to citizens who ‘happen’ to be non-heterosexual. For both opponents and proponents, the idea of same-sex marriage seems to be heavy with symbolism. Public debates tend to reduce this host of cultural meanings or connotations to the familiar split between ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’. This often proves to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, since the very proposition of legalizing same-sex marriage can ignite a ‘culture war’. On closer examination, however, many more than just two voices can be heard. Some religious groups (notably liberal Protestant and Jewish denominations) have solemnized same-sex relationships since the mid-1980s, whereas legalization has met with strong opposition not only in secular (e.g. post-communist) societies, but also in some more radical LGBT or queer circles. Public turmoil about this issue brings to light that even to those citizens who cherish the division of Church and State, marriage is not just a matter of rights, but of rituals. The latter bring along a host of cultural, transcendent associations, cutting across the religious-secular divide. Debates on same-sex marriage thus reveal a multitude of discursive constructions of marriage beyond the law.

In order to comprehend these varied symbolic exchanges, an in-depth historical, cross-cultural analysis of the discursive strategies that are being employed in the proposition of, and in opposition to, same-sex marriage is needed. This special issue – consisting of three main articles and two response articles – aims at contributing to such an analysis by zooming in into debates, past and present, in particular in the Netherlands and Sweden, and to a lesser extent in the United States. Both the Netherlands and Sweden are known for their high level of social acceptance of homosexuality, whereas in the United States social acceptance seems to be increasing as well. Moreover, these countries differ in their religious – and political – configurations. The articles in this issue aim at highlighting how in discourses on same-sex marriage, specific conceptualizations of both religion and homosexuality – notably in terms of individual vs. relational, public

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vs. private, and chosen vs. given – are articulated in connection with other social identities and institutions.

In recent decades, the public perception of both religion and sexual diversity in Western liberal societies has changed fundamentally. While religion is increasingly considered to be a private matter, sexual diversity has gained public prominence. Moreover, whereas religious identity, which for long was accepted as a matter of course, has steadily become contested in its public and most characteristic manifestations, acceptance of sexual diversity is now often presented as a prerequisite for modern citizenship. Conflicts about religion and homosexuality are, therefore, an important source for studying the connecting and dividing functions of religion in contemporary societies. By focusing on the strategic and ideological assumptions, interests, and effects of present-day constructions of homosexuality and religion in public discourses on same-sex marriage, this issue aims to map out the social, political, and cultural dimensions of framing religion and homosexuality as polarized constructs in the national contexts of the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States.

Clashes on issues like the legalization of same-sex marriage “reflect changing public perceptions of sexuality, while simultaneously indicating shifting boundaries between ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’ as well as between the public and the private spheres”.¹ On the one hand, LGBT rights movements have traditionally critiqued monotheistic religions for their patriarchal, colonial and homophobic tendencies, and have often positioned themselves as secular.² On the other hand, for certain conservative religious groups, the struggle against the acceptance of homosexuality – and of same-sex marriage in particular – has become an important identity marker.³ In some parts of the world, for example in Central and Eastern Europe, this coalesces with right-wing nationalist movements and a renewed political prominence of religious institutions.⁴ Yet in several Western European countries, right-wing homonationalists, sometimes more for opportunistic reasons than out of ideology, call for a defense of ‘our’ gays and lesbians against (radical) Islam and claim the acceptance of sexual diversity to be essential for citizenship.⁵ These oppositional identity politics not only reveal a changing public perspective towards sexual diversity but also towards religion, social identities, and citizenship.⁶ As strategically useful essentialist notions tend to be used in contemporary public discourses, a subtext of more nuanced or fluid conceptions of both religion and sexuality as ‘critical conjuncture’ is eclipsed.

It is these conceptions of religion and sexuality that the articles in this issue are concerned with. While the focus is on public discourses on same-sex marriage, the three main articles look beyond the question of marriage rights. In different ways, they also look beyond the very case of the legalization of same-sex marriage in the Netherlands as such. David Bos moves back in time to discover how Catholic and Protestant pastors partly paved the way for the social acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands, whereas they – as well as the Christian traditions they represented more generally – also provided a ritual and symbolic repertoire to be deployed by gays and lesbians seeking public display and recognition of their relationships. Marco Derks focuses on a debate that followed the introduction of same-sex marriage in the Netherlands, that is, the debate on allegedly Christian marriage registrars with conscientious objections against conducting same-sex wedding ceremonies. He shows, among others, how the nuptial symbolics are highly valued by both opponents and sympathizers of these registrars. Mariecke van den Berg analyzes the opposition against the introduction of

‘gender-neutral’ marriage in another European country, Sweden, where the (predominantly secular) majority was unexpectedly confronted with a coalition of representatives from several ‘free churches’ and non-religious persons. Marvin Ellison and Heather White provide reflections on these three articles and draw connections to debates in their own national context: the United States. Together, these articles provide new perspectives – and argue for further research – on the different roles religion has played and continues to play, both in processes of legalization of same-sex marriage and in the performance of wedding ceremonies.

Notes

1. Van den Berg et al., “Contested Social Orders,” 116; cf. Vattimo, *Belief*; Woodhead, “Sex and Secularization”; Bracke, “Conjugating the Modern/Religious”; Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society.”
2. Van den Berg et al., “Contested Social Orders,” 116; cf. Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times”; Göle, “Powers of the Secular.”
3. Van den Berg et al., “Contested Social Orders,” 116; cf. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; MacCulloch, *Reformation*; Bates, *A Church at War*; Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*; Cobb, *God Hates Fags*; Bos, “Acceptatie van homoseksualiteit”; Samson, Jansen, and Notermans, “Gender Agenda.”
4. Sremac and Ganzevoort, *Religious and Sexual Nationalisms*; cf. van den Berg et al. “Contested Social Orders,” 121–5.
5. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Puar, “Citation and Censorship.”
6. Butler, “Sexual Politics”; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens, “Sexual Politics”; Dudink, “Homosexuality.”

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