

Sadomasochism and Spirituality

A Queerly Religious Challenge to the Gay Marriage Paradigm

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Marriage, n. The state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress and two slaves, making in all, two.

—Ambrose Bierce¹

The first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed an astonishing surge forward for full civil marriage equality. In the United States, this campaign for gay marriage, however, has gone far beyond a demand for the legalization of same-sex relationships. Whether intentional or not, marriage equality has quickly become a single-issue movement, pushing all the other forms of inequality and mistreatment suffered by lesbians and gay men to the side. The complex question of the need for nonjudgmental and affordable health care, for example, has been reduced to the plea for permission to put one partner on the other's health insurance policy. Rather than the notion of "LGBT rights," marriage has become a *gay* campaign, applying only to rights needed by same-sex couples.

The dangerously ambiguous status of the relationships of transgendered people is never mentioned in gay marriage press releases or political rallies. Concern about national security adds a further layer of complexity to transgendered relationships. Justifying a host of intrusions into the private lives of American citizens under the rubric of "security," the federal government has made it even more difficult for transpeople to change legal documents to reflect their true gender status. Employers are required to check social security numbers, thus outing many Americans of transgendered experience. The State

Department is refusing to recognize even male/female marriages between U.S. citizens and foreign nationals if one of the partners is transgendered.²

Progress in securing legal status for same-sex relationships has of course generated a vicious backlash from various conservative organizations. Scrambling to mount a defense against that backlash, activists funnel much-needed energy and financial resources away from equally urgent concerns.³ LGBT opponents of gay marriage argue that the media storm obscures their attempts to make progress in a host of other areas, including antigay violence; research on AIDS and other health concerns such as breast cancer; discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, and access to public services; homophobia in the mental health profession; opposition to full social equality bolstered by religious fundamentalists; the harsh treatment of gay youth, which often leads to their being rejected by their families, peers, and communities; and the invisibility of lesbian and gay elders.

Meanwhile, queer theorists note that marriage as a heterosexual model is failing even male/female couples more than half of the time. Many are likewise troubled by trying to comply with a social form that originated in male dominance over and ownership of women. A good number of gay men wonder whether monogamy is essential for marriage and, if so, if it will work for them. In short, is there space within LGBT communities to lobby for other ways to guarantee social recognition for uniquely queer romantic and sexual bonds, and equality that is not dependent on marital status?⁴

Marriage equality advocates will often insist that equal civil status depends on proving that we are morally or spiritually deserving of full citizenship. Committed, monogamous, long-term relationships are held out as the gold standard of gay maturity and thus necessary for securing our civil rights; Bruce Bawer and Gabriel Rotello are just two among many making this argument.⁵ Christian theologians defending the sanctification of same-sex relationships usually assume that monogamy defines relationships that can be blessed. Eugene F. Rogers Jr. illustrates this theological approach to the significance of marriage by arguing that

marriage shares with celibacy the end of sanctifying the body, of permitting it something *more* to be about, something *further* to mean, something *better* to desire, until finally it gets taken up into the life in which God loves God. . . . Sexual activity does not make sanctification any “easier” than celibacy does. As traditional marriage and childrearing are gifts of grace more than human achievements, and means of sanctification rather than satisfaction, so too monogamous, committed gay and lesbian relationships are also gifts of grace, means of sanctification, upholding of the community of the people of God. They are means, bodily means, that God can use to catch human beings up into

less and less conditional acts of self-donation, finally into that unconditional response to God's self-donation that God's self gives to the Trinity.⁶

Conservative groups have ridiculed the idea that same-sex relationships (especially those of gay men) could ever be monogamous. Because of this perceived moral failure, critics argue that same-sex couples would change the definition of the institution, opening the door to legalization of polygamous unions or multi-partnered arrangements.⁷ Such charges raise the specter of a public relations nightmare, despite the fact that adultery and patronization of the sex industry are common behaviors among married heterosexuals. If some lesbians and gay men can demonstrate worthiness by being able to live up to the monogamous ideal of legal marriage and the responsibilities of parenthood, those of us who fail to do so embody the very public relations nightmare marriage equality advocates so deeply fear, and this nightmare is often perceived as a direct result of our own willful and self-indulgent behavior. Some gay men insist that their marriages are valid (or would be) despite sex with outside partners, yet many defenders of same-sex marriage have condemned such deviance from social expectations.⁸

In addition to questions of monogamy and multiple sex partners, another and somewhat surprising target of concern are communities that engage in sadomasochistic or more generally non-vanilla sexual practices. Conservative groups often capitalize on images of leather queens from gay pride parades or stories about purportedly bizarre sexual practices and relationships as a way to demonize non-heterosexual people more broadly. Yet the critique also comes from LGBT-identified people themselves, perhaps reflecting a concern for how these otherwise marginal practices could derail our full inclusion in both civic and religious institutions—including marriage.

A significant by-product of the marriage equality debate, I would argue, is the division of LGBT people into those who are socially and religiously acceptable (monogamous couples) and those who fail to achieve such respectability (mostly the non-monogamous and those engaged in non-vanilla sex). In this essay, I want to propose that the failure of the latter group relies on supposing that non-vanilla (especially sadomasochistic) sexual practices do not admit any moral or spiritual value. By offering just a snapshot of those sexual practices here, and the ways in which they can surface a profound spirituality, I want to urge not only a reassessment of non-monogamous, non-vanilla sexuality; I also want to suggest how such a reassessment can broaden the reach of LGBT movements for liberation beyond marriage equality alone. Indeed, what seems the queerest may well prove to be the most spiritually and politically liberating.

Locating the Critique

The critique of non-monogamy (often referred to as “promiscuity” by its critics) and of non-vanilla sexual practices takes a variety of forms, whether in terms of morality, psychology, or theology. The critique also comes from a wide range of groups and perspectives, including LGBT people themselves. Despite her efforts to defend the sacredness of same-sex eroticism, Christian theologian Carter Heyward, for example, locates multiple sex partners and sadomasochism within the very systems of oppression from which we seek liberation. “Each time we are captivated in a power-laded struggle for domination and control,” she writes, “or for submission and being controlled, whether in bed or in church, we short-circuit the yearning for relationship . . . and the process of becoming at one with God and creation itself.”⁹

Heyward further links sadomasochistic practices to domestic violence and the troubling dynamic of abused partners finding sexual pleasure in their pain:

We have learned, generation upon generation, to take pleasure in pain—that is, to respect our distress and appreciate our bruises as signs of our blessedness. . . . A battered spouse is a victim of a battering spouse but also, I think, of a pervasive mentality in which battering is related to justification or “setting things right.” Sadomasochism is testimony to the same cult of battering, pain, and suffering. And not only in the sadomasochism of leather and chains, bondage and discipline, slave and master, but also the sadomasochism many of us experience in the connections between sexual coerciveness/overpowering and genital titillation and pleasure, or simply in our attachments to the very people who treat us worst.¹⁰

Heyward also locates gay male promiscuity within a larger social-economics of “body worship” by noting that

As a lesbian, I must admit my anxiety about the body cults/body worship I see every day in television commercials, magazines, films, and store windows. The sexist and heterosexist cult of body worship is a multibillion-dollar-per-annum enterprise, and it is also a people-eating machine that devours the flesh and spirit of girls and women, boys and men . . . I cannot say any more for the gay male “meat racks” and what I hear about the gay male cult of body worship.¹¹

Heyward’s analysis is apparently informed by the writings of anti-porn feminists, many of them lesbians, who began attacking sadomasochism in the late 1970s.¹² While lesbianism was upheld as the ultimate form of feminism, sadomasochism was demonized as its evil opposite, the lived form of patriarchy and racism, predicated on female self-hatred and male violence.¹³ Male feminists like John Stoltenberg also attacked gay male sexuality using the language

of anti-porn feminism.¹⁴ This ideology spread far beyond Christian theology. Even some aspects of pagan theology, as expressed by Arthur Evans,¹⁵ among others, were and are explicitly opposed to sadomasochistic practices and to the kind of public sex Heyward sums up as “meat rack” cruising.

The rejoinder to these attacks came from lesbians and other feminists who were opponents of censorship. They felt that the liberation of female sexuality was an important component of gaining equality for women. Some of them believed that in the context of woman-to-woman eroticism, both pornography and sadomasochism could be freed of patriarchal toxicity and transformed into something with value for women. Others were prepared to argue against the censorship of any sexually explicit media, and defended the entire leather community, gay men, and heterosexuals, as well as lesbians.¹⁶ My own work in this area grows out of my experience as a sex-positive feminist and sex radical—experience that has, quite queerly for some, taught me a great deal about being “spiritual.”

Locating the Spirit in a BDSM World

For my purposes in this essay, sadomasochism (SM) is defined (based on my personal participation and observation) as a form of sexual fantasy play engaged in by mutually consenting adults. That play can take many forms, including dominant/submissive role-playing, the use of fetish costumes or substances, physical restraint, sensory deprivation, emotional ordeals, or the careful application of intense physical sensation. The rather wide range of activities, roles, practices, and postures in this kind of play is often summarized with the compound acronym BDSM, which evokes elements of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism.

A BDSM encounter typically includes a preliminary conversation or negotiation in which desires and limits are clarified. A code phrase or gesture that either party can use to take a break and leave the frame of the fantasy is chosen. Constant communication (both verbal and nonverbal) continues during the enactment, which is referred to as a scene or session, to distinguish that time from ordinary reality, where different rules prevail. There is a community-wide expectation that all parties will be in contact after the encounter, to reaffirm its positive aspects and do any needed aftercare. A BDSM scene may or may not include genital sex.

In recent years, BDSM play rather routinely takes place within the context of a community that provides continuing education in the safe and imaginative use of various techniques. There are a plethora of identities available to people in that community, depending on specific fantasies and fetishes. The

three most popular archetypes are top, bottom, and switch. The top is the person who prefers to orchestrate or conduct the fantasy. It is the top who makes use of the equipment and initiates dialogue. A bottom prefers to be the subject of the encounter. A switch is capable of functioning in either role. There are a growing number of players who like mutual intense stimulation or physical restraint and frequent switching during the course of their time together. There may be a competitive theme, to see who can out-do whom, or the dynamic may be one of mutuality—mirroring one another and glorying in this validation.

There are also scenes in which one person functions more as a guide than as a dominant top who expresses control or a sadist who monitors or inflicts levels of pain. The focus of this type of scene is to create a spiritually meaningful ordeal or journey for the partner. Rather than relishing the flow of power between them, the guide strives to facilitate the partners' internal state by manipulating their physical experience. The goal is transcendence, entering a state beyond the limits of material existence. The annual Black Leather Wings gathering, part of the Radical Faerie movement, offers a good example of this strive toward transcendence.

The Radical Faeries emerged in tandem with a gay civil rights movement in the 1970s and tapped into a broader countercultural energy. Rather than relying on an apologetic posture or seeking "inclusion" in mainstream social institutions and religious communities, Radical Faeries adopted a proactive and constructive approach to their queer sexualities and gender expressions. By turning to a variety of sources—such as the mythopoetic men's movement, feminism, and pagan and neo-pagan Earth-based traditions—Radical Faeries sought not only to critique the patriarchal and hierarchical dynamics of the wider society, but also to embrace what they understood as the fundamental connection between spirituality and sexuality. This queerly creative mix of traditions and practices generated a host of ritualized forms of sexuality and relational bonds, including a number of distinct groupings within this loosely affiliated and now worldwide network.

Among those groupings, the Black Leather Wings celebrates and ritualizes BDSM as a spiritual practice, as their annual ball dances demonstrate. This multi-gendered gathering is a celebration in which nude or costumed people are pierced and decorated. Oranges and lemons or brightly colored balls and bells are hung from sterile sutures in their chest, arms, or legs. The celebration includes a group dance that goes on for hours until everyone is in a state of ecstasy. There is no power division between piercers and dancers because they all take turns ornamenting one another and then joining the ritual.

Embodied experience within BDSM blurs the line between supposedly perverse sexuality and mainstream spirituality. Used here, the term

“spirituality” is equally complex. It can be used to describe any human activity or value that goes beyond meeting our basic survival needs. (This is only true in cultures where ritual magic or worship is not needed to help people to meet urgent needs for food, water, shelter, and other life-giving resources.) Spirituality can also refer to the many ways in which one finds or makes meaning, or a search for guidelines and values to govern how one lives. It can be a search for entities or forces beyond the human sphere of experience. This may be framed as a need to experience oneness with a deity or other supernatural entity; a sense of oneness or unity with other living things or the world or universe as a whole; extended ecstatic states that go beyond the mundane physical pleasures of food and sex; or simple confirmation that we are not alone, that our lives matter.

Spirituality may overlap with religion, but it is not identical to it. In my own work, I find Rudolf Otto’s concept of “the numinous” helpful¹⁷ as well as William James’s term “personal religion.” As James describes it:

The personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition; but the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case—so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete.¹⁸

According to James, religion is the codification and institutionalization of one charismatic individual’s spiritual experiences. By following that individual’s precepts, members hope to become better people and win value in the Other World. Or they may seek to duplicate the founder’s transcendent states. Most religions have a hierarchy; there are clergy and laypeople. Generally speaking, spirituality does not recognize these divisions as knowledge is shared along a horizontal plane of power. Religions, by contrast, are based on polarized values: this is true, that is not; this is virtue, and that is sin. As James suggested: “Personal religion, even without theology or ritual, would prove to embody some elements that morality pure and simple does not contain.”¹⁹

As Valerie Lesniak has observed, spirituality may encompass contradictions or borrow from any tradition:

As the complexity of the pluralistic present-day world permeates human consciousness and ordinary life, individuals find themselves seeking ways to . . . find some meaning in their multifaceted yet fragmented world. The appeal to spirituality has captured the religious imagination of contemporary people as encompassing these spiritual quests more than an appeal to organized religion or systematic theology. By centering attention on practical lived

human experience, spirituality is viewed as a more inclusive, tolerant and flexible canopy under which to pursue the mysteries of the human spirit and the Sacred. Spirituality has become ecumenical and interreligious and not the reserve of any one tradition.²⁰

Patrick D. Hopkins attempts to push the academic discourse about sado-masochism beyond the logjam between anti-porn feminists and the libertarian claims of BDSM practitioners that any sexual behavior between consenting adults must be permissible. He defines BDSM as "simulation" rather than "replication of patriarchal dominant/submissive activities," and calls on radical feminists to reassess their opposition based on this "important epistemological and ethical distinction."²¹

Replication and simulation are very different. Replication implies that SM encounters merely reproduce patriarchal activity in a different physical area. Simulation implies that SM selectively replays surface patriarchal behaviors onto a different contextual field. As Hopkins notes, that contextual field makes a profound difference: "SM is constructed as a performance, as a staging, a production, a simulation in which participants are writers, producers, . . . actors, and audience." Just like any performance, there are elements that appear to be similar to the "real" activity being staged. But as Hopkins likewise notes, "similarity is not sufficient for replication."²²

If Hopkins is correct, an argument could be made that all sex is a form of simulation. The masculine heterosexual man performs virility for his girlfriend or spouse. She in turn mirrors him with a polarized performance or simulation of femininity. Vanilla sex requires a simulation of affection, respect, gentleness, and equality. BDSM works for the same reasons that any form of human sexuality works. It satisfies people's need for an attractive and arousing partner, a fantasy about the emotional dynamic between the participants, activities that are exciting and gratifying, and a context that feels appropriate in its level of risk or safety.

All of this can, and I hope will, lead to a reassessment of non-vanilla sexual practices, not only for the sake of dismantling stereotypes but also for the profound spirituality one can access in the BDSM world. But what does any of this have to do with marriage?

Broadening the Horizon beyond Marriage

As Mark Jordan has pointed out, the fight about gay marriage is essentially a religious one masked by the rhetoric of secular legalism.²³ On a deeper level, it is implicitly about whether gay men and lesbians have spiritual value. By making a monogamous commitment to only one other person, the same-sex

participants are supposedly promising to follow the same moral code as their heterosexual counterparts, and thereby prove that they have the discipline to be faithful. Because marriage will demonstrate that same-sex couples have spiritual value, by that token, all homosexual men and women will supposedly be potentially decent and responsible citizens who deserve equal rights.

There is an unspoken assumption that the sex within these idealized relationships will not be kinky. For one thing, many of these couples are or plan to become parents. The United States is already prone to moral panics if anyone under the age of eighteen is exposed to the sight of a living homosexual. A living homosexual with a vanilla sex life is bad enough. People in the BDSM community are presumed to be unfit parents, and child custody cases are one of the most frequent breaches of our civil rights. With the constant looming threat of family court, people who do BDSM who are also parents live in terror of losing their children, no matter how scrupulous they are about keeping their sex lives as invisible as possible.

No convincing argument has yet been made that the practitioners of sado-masochism are significantly different than their peers in terms of education level, job satisfaction, values, participation in a stable relationship, or any other marker of a mature human being. The lack of any good research on this topic has led experts in the fields of medicine, mental health, and sexology to call for removal of the categories of "sexual sadist" and "sexual masochist" from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV-TR*, the authoritative text on mental disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association.²⁴

Moreover, BDSM people have participated in virtually every aspect of the spiritual life, no matter how it is defined. A broad and secular definition might be the performance of activities that benefit others more than oneself or a demonstration of stewardship toward the community or the Earth itself. The leather community has passed this test time and time again with its relentless and stalwart fundraising for AIDS education and direct services, breast cancer, nonprofit agencies that serve LGBT people, and a host of charities too numerous to catalogue here.

If we broaden the meaning of spirituality even further, then we might say that it consists of a set of values or ethics that prevent one from harming others. Here, too, the leather community demonstrates consistent concern with the well-being of its members. No other sexual minority offers as many gateway organizations or as much education to newcomers. The BDSM community's standards include rigorous training in various techniques, so that both top and bottom are educated about how to enact fantasies safely that on the surface may seem dangerous. This community was one of the first to adopt safer sex practices for the prevention of HIV, and they are enforced at

public events, along with an injunction to avoid playing while intoxicated. The negotiation process and use of safe words are embedded in a culture where it is understood that everyone in a scene should leave it feeling better than when the encounter began. If the terms “slave” and “master” were not in use, you would think that BDSM was an attempt to live out the most stringent feminist concerns for equality both in the bedroom and out of it.

But BDSM people do call themselves slaves or masters and a host of other names denoting their fantasy role in either wielding or ceding power. There are whips and chains. There are piercing needles and hoists and racks. Their luggage is heavily packed with slings, paddles, nipple clamps, masks, leather chaps, corsets, collars, handcuffs, and a long list of other toys or equipment that Homeland Security officers love to confiscate in airports. And the community-wide standards described above are most often taught at public sex events. Play parties, as they are commonly known, are often an evening attraction at leather conferences or contests.

An encounter between a top and a bottom, or a room full of people engaged in flirting, cruising, and playing, can just be dirty, good fun. Yet to my pagan way of thinking, this constitutes a spiritual activity in and of itself. By enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, we give thanks to the sacred forces that created us. This is numinous bounty, a generosity that is meant to compensate us, at least a little, for the harsh fact of death. The knowledge that life is short almost requires us to enjoy it as much as we can now because we do not know what pleasures will be afforded to us in the “Western Lands.” We hope for healing and rest there, but our knowledge does not extend that far, and so we focus on what we do know, and offer comfort and delight to our fellow travelers on Mother Earth.

What then do we need for an act to become sacred? Consecrated space is a beginning, found in many times and places as a preliminary for encounters with holy forces. The places where BDSM occur are often deliberately cleansed and blessed by community members. The apparently secular act of setting up equipment and inviting the community to gather also sets the space apart and marks it as the dancing ground of the gods. It is a temple they may enter, if they wish to see it that way. The typical play party includes atheists, Christians, pagans, Buddhists, and adherents of many other faiths. Each person or group of people will have a different experience there. Intention plays a key role. While the triad at the St. Andrew’s cross may be chasing transcendence, allowing the bottom to assume the identity of the goddess Innana as she descends to the realm of death and comes back to life, the man in a cage may be content to lick books through the bars for an hour, and go home happy with nothing but dust on his tongue.

Virtually every BDSM technique—exposure to extremes of heat or cold, sensory deprivation, flogging, suspension, deliberate wounding, fasting, confession, yielding one's will to a higher power—has also been employed by shamans and other technicians of the sacred, probably for millions of years. Mircea Eliade catalogued the cross-cultural existence of these phenomena, and gay historian and mythologist Randy Conner has documented their special value to and association with gay and differently gendered men.²⁵ A plethora of authors have pawed over the sadomasochistic experiences of Christian saints and quarreled about the sublimated eroticism (or not) in these stories.²⁶

As human beings evolved, we longed for something besides mere survival. We hoped for another world. We craved protection and direction from beings wiser and more powerful than ourselves. And we learned that we could use our limited, weak bodies to acquire a vision of that Other World. Pain is a horse that can be ridden to heaven, with the subject's body serving as the beaten drum. And these visions are not for the bottom alone. The preparation for a scene, laying out of equipment, dedication of the victim, and the mortification or manipulation of their experience is tiring and exhilarating enough to deliver the top as well into an altered state.

What then and exactly is it that people experience when they have an extra-physical or ecstatic experience during a scene? There may be a sense of connection with all other living beings. The energy that creates life and sustains the universe may become visible as a rhythmic presence, pulsing in the background or infusing human beings with harmony. There may be a new sense of respect for life and an immense consciousness of unconditional love, given and received. Fear may be confronted and forced to flee. Beyond that, each individual's experience is unique and private. Ultimately, the value and meaning of these experiences are discerned by their effect on the given person's life—not by whether they took place in a monastery or a dungeon. The sublime does not disdain the squalid.

The spiritual value of non-monogamous relationships is less gaudy, but no less significant. It develops character in mundane domestic life more often than it opens one's eyes to the face of the divine. This relationship style can include casual sex with strangers, open relationships with a commitment to a primary partner, polyamory that gives each lover his or her own space in an extended family, triads that may or may not be open, the supposedly monogamous relationship with occasional nights out, and other configurations. On the surface, it would seem that the mindless promiscuity of anonymous, casual sex would be the most difficult to defend. But I have heard too many stories about lovers who met in bathhouses, crisis counseling offered to a trick, and comfort extended to a troubled married man to dismiss these encounters

as soulless or selfish. Without the bathhouse culture of the 1970s, there may never have been such a thing as gay liberation. This sharing of sex generated a sharing of information and a sense of community. Casual sex can, at least on occasion, represent hospitality offered to a stranger, welcome extended to the outcast, generosity held out to someone who suffers. Eros is compatible with the practice of compassion. For sexual minorities, it is a holy sanctuary. It is not the only sanctuary, but it is one we shut down at our peril.

Parting ways with a stranger is easy compared to ongoing, committed, open relationships. The stereotype of orgiastic, irresponsible, impulsive days and nights filled with every manner of sexual position and technique could not be further from the truth, alas. Instead, polyamory (which involves multiple romantic relationships) and other types of non-monogamy (which generally distinguish between the primary partner and lesser connections) are a good deal of trouble. Many people assume that jealousy is only a problem for monogamous couples. But the fact that one has made a commitment to enjoying sex or love with more than one person does not eliminate jealousy. Facing the events that trigger toxic insecurity and taking care of one's self in the process makes for a braver, more generous spirit. A healthy self-love is strengthened, as well as love for one's partner and even for the person or people one is dating.

Being monogamous does not eliminate jealousy, either. All people, whether monogamous or not, doubt that we deserve to be loved. We all fear abandonment. We all hold a secret belief that there is not enough affection or sex to go around. Non-monogamy requires us to face those irrational beliefs and struggle toward a more balanced worldview and psyche. And any time we engage in an effort to love ourselves or others with more compassion, we are engaged in a spiritual practice. This sort of discipline does not necessarily rest upon a belief in supernatural forces. Until we can clean out the rain gutters of our souls and allow human love to fill our homes, we cannot perceive the love of our Creator(s), which flows effortlessly and abundantly all around us.

In my own experience, through non-monogamy, I have learned to value my partner for telling me the truth about what or whom he desires. I have learned to see the sexual experiences that do not include me as being central to his growth and development. One way to soothe jealousy is to unearth or define my own sexual needs and stand up for them by revealing them, even if they are things that my partner will not enjoy with me. I have also learned how to love more than one person.

These observations and experiences are precisely what the advocates for same-sex marriage equality fear. They are the ingredients for a public relations debacle. Yet what is undeniable for me and for so many involved in

non-normative styles of relating is the spiritual value in the relationship structures and sexual institutions many of us have developed to help us survive in a very unfriendly world. To be clear, I am no foe of same-sex marriage. At the same time, and in ways similar to the call for gay men and lesbians to serve openly in the military, most LGBT people and our community organizations were woefully unprepared to deal with the panicked and vitriolic reaction of those who oppose us. This has only been exacerbated by the insistence from some in our communities that we strive for ordinary lives that differ as little as possible from the straight middle class, which has divided our energies and efforts.

Perhaps we have relied too much on a legalistic, civil rights model for gaining equality. The slow process of education, done on a one-to-one basis by queers who are brave enough to come out, might be the only thing that will allow such legislation to move forward, let alone be respected and upheld. Even then, the “lavender ceiling” will still be there, holding us back, as long as people hate and fear us. The answer to this quandary, however, will not be found by focusing on the least threatening segments of LGBT people and practices, which will only further stigmatize those deemed less acceptable by mainstream standards. Besides which, the profound diversity among us is no longer a secret. Effective public relations and education must address the complete spectrum of queer lives, or we risk looking dishonest and hypocritical.

Whether most same-sex couples would like to get married or not, it has unfortunately become a test of the power of the lesbian and gay male community. Every time a state amends its constitution to restrict marriage as between one man and one woman, we are seen as weak and thwarted. My fear is that we will internalize that mass media view of ourselves and give up if the battle for same-sex marriage turns out to be a lot more arduous than initial, small victories led us to believe. Yes—some of us are going to be happiest in relationship patterns that resemble those that were developed in patriarchal and racist societies. Maybe they can uplift marriage into something more beautiful and just. Meanwhile, others will continue to explore alternatives.

Is the gay man who lives alone but has a large network of ex-lovers and friends and is sexually busy on weekends in the city’s parks truly single? What about the gay man who is parenting a child with a lesbian couple? How do we define ex-lovers who are sharing custody of their family? Then there is the leather “boy” who has a “Daddy” he sees once a month and entire clans of leather people who pledge allegiance to a dominant figure at its head, even though they may never have had sex or played with that person. Of course, there are many types of BDSM relationships, some of them even monogamous.

The gift queer people offer is to create a proliferation of choices, to refuse the married/single dichotomy. Yes, our relationships ought to be accorded equality and dignity, yet we also need to validate the rights of every individual. Eventually, that may mean that the worst fears of the Christian right wing will indeed come to pass, with the state *and* organized religions offering more than a one-size-fits-all approach to winning legal recognition and sacred blessings. Jeremy R. Carrette describes well what that kind of queerly religious and spiritual moment would entail:

What I want to suggest is that intensity and intimacy are seen as political categories of a new theological exchange, not some romantic sharing or commercial product, but a new basis for Christian living in intense communities. Intensity demands intimacy, it demands self-disclosure, demands integration of mind, body and heart. Intimacy is intense because it demands the embodied reality of oneself in terms of fantasy enacted and a freedom in a pleased exchange of the heart. . . . What is potentially dangerous about S&M . . . is precisely its intense exchange. Intense exchanges are dangerous to capitalism but not necessarily to a theology of loving power and humble reverence.²⁷

Notes

1. Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (Owings Mills, MD: Stemmer House Publishers, Inc., 1978), 162.
2. Anonymous interview with "Adam" and "Eve," April 13, 2005. Adam is an American citizen; his partner is not. After changing all of his identification papers, including his birth certificate, and obtaining genital surgery, Adam was told that because he is transgendered, the federal government would not recognize his marriage or allow his wife to immigrate. They now live in her native land. Also see the immigration section in the National Center for Trans Equality website, http://transequality.org/federal_gov.html.
3. For both positive and negative assessments of this, see the anthology edited by Greg Wharton and Ian Philips, *I Do, I Don't: Queers on Marriage* (San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004).
4. Michael Bronski, "Over the Rainbow: Gay-Movement Organizers Obsessed with Fighting for Same-Sex Marriage Seem to Have Forgotten Their Roots in a Quest for a More Liberated World, One They Shared with Feminists Who Viewed Marriage as Hopelessly Patriarchal," in Wharton and Philips, eds., *I Do, I Don't*, 48–52. Non-monogamy is an issue for many lesbians as well; see Jackie Strano, "I Met My Wife at a Sex Party," in *ibid.*, 326–28.
5. Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Touchstone, 1993); Gabriel Rotello, *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men* (New York: Dutton, 1997).

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8. Dan Savage, "The Great Mate Debate," June 15, 2007, http://chemistry.typepad.com/the_great_male_debate/2007/06/re_gay_marriage_revisted. See also John Lyttle, "Like Homophobes, Some Homosexuals Regard Monogamy, Official Partnerships and Marriage as an Unnatural State for Gay Men," *The Independent* (April 11, 1997).
9. Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), 41.
10. *Ibid.*, 129.
11. *Ibid.*, 196–97.
12. While Heyward admits that the question of the morality of sadomasochism is a complicated one with no easy or fixed answer, she nonetheless argues that physically hurting one another is wrong, with or without consent. She further ties such behavior to the social systems of abuse, including racism and patriarchy, in which we are all embedded. See Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 104–9.
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26. Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
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Not Just a Phase

Single Black Women in the Black Church

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Can a black Catholic woman from Ghana still be a “good churchwoman” if she’s not married by a certain age? Would she have an easier time being one in the seemingly more liberating culture of the United States than in the traditional missionary Ghanaian culture? Who and what defines a “good churchwoman”? Why is the church so irrevocably empowered to define the status of women without actually listening to their life experiences? Do other single black churchwomen experience the pressure of this particular imposed status from the church? Where does the particular brand of U.S. racism factor into these questions? Is this pressure intensified for me because I have the added layer of Ghanaian cultural norms?

These are just a few of the questions marking my path forward into uncharted space—a space shaped simultaneously by faith, race, gender, and sexuality; a space populated by a growing number of black women refusing the confines of the very church that helped to liberate and empower them during post-slavery; a space where religion marks my body and its many (unmarried) desires nearly as much as race does in the U.S. racialized society. It is, in short, a genuinely queer space of resisting dichotomous identities without knowing precisely how to live into alternatives. It is also a genuinely queer space of doing the unthinkable: questioning religion and the church. Whether religion, and more specifically the black church, will help me chart and, even more, live in this queer space remains an open question.

This essay is an attempt to share my own formation as a woman of African descent in the black Catholic Church, first in the African context, and then