

systematic decimation of domestic programs that began with the Clinton presidency and has hit warp speed in the current Bush administration. We are a nation that is becoming increasingly desperate as all manner of domestic programs—education, health care, welfare, environment—are being cut and/or retrenched for the great majority of us in order to benefit an increasingly White social, political, and economic elite.

Same-sex marriage and the legal and economic benefits that it will offer those who participate in it can help stave off, for a while, the tidal wave of retrenchment in social welfare programs. It can be seen as a marker and a judgment on the most mean-spirited public policies I have seen in my lifetime. Although I am equally sure that same-sex marriage is a long-overdue justice issue in our society, I cannot help but think that it also represents a deeply felt and experienced need to help provide for those whom we care for in a time when the supports to do so are being eroded by tax cuts for the wealthy.

Relational justice demands that we pull back from the wedding-industry mentality that saturates much of what we do around marriage these days; take down the various shrines to marriage I see in far too many newlyweds' homes that feel more like monuments than memorials; roll up our theo-ethical sleeves; and begin to really sort through what commitment, love, justice, and relationship mean in our various societies and cultures. I am drawn back to a conversation I had with Mary Hunt years ago when we were sharing a much-needed beer at a professional society meeting. Our talk turned to relationships, and I had begun to use the language of "what it takes to make a relationship work." Mary listened carefully and then stopped me. "Emilie," she said, "I don't think it's about making a relationship work. For me, it's about giving it attention." I have carried this conversation with me over the years and have found it to be a much richer and truer marker for relationality . . . and marriage.

#### RESPONSE

*Patrick S. Cheng*

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As an openly gay man who has been in a same-sex relationship for more than thirteen years, I found Mary Hunt's essay to be of great interest. In general, I agree with much of Hunt's critique about same-sex marriage from the perspective of relational justice. For example, I agree that the civil and ecclesial aspects of marriage should be more clearly separated, giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and giving to God what belongs to God (see Matt. 22:21, Mark 12:17, and Luke 20:25).<sup>1</sup> I also agree that religious communities

<sup>1</sup> Separating the civil and ecclesial aspects of marriage is not a new idea. Peter Gomes, the openly gay chaplain at Harvard University, has noted that marriage was instituted by the Puritans in

should imagine and encourage alternatives to marriage in order to recognize the multiplicity of relationships, sexual or otherwise, that exist within the queer community.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, I differ from Hunt in that I would place more emphasis on the sacramental value of same-sex marriage. In particular, I suggest in this essay that same-sex marriage rites can serve a critical function for queer people by liberating us from the shame that we experience throughout our lives. When my partner, Michael, and I celebrated our holy union four years ago, we were amazed at how much we were transformed by the experience of publicly recognizing the holiness of our relationship before our families, our friends, and God. I have also witnessed this transformation in the people who have been married or otherwise joined together within the Metropolitan Community Church, a denomination that ministers primarily to the queer community.

For many queer people, shame is the quintessential sin that we face in our lives.<sup>3</sup> Because of the negative messages that queer people have received about our sexualities from an early age onward, many of us suffer from an ongoing sense that we are “fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, to be queer in our society is to experience not only shame but also ostracism and even demonization.<sup>5</sup> We experience a pervasive sense of never quite measuring up, and, as a result, we often hide and remain closeted about our sexualities and our relationships.

This understanding of shame as the fundamental sin for queer people is consistent with feminist reflections about sin. A number of feminist theologians have noted that, for women, sin is the opposite of the classical Augustinian and Niebuhrian idea of sin as excessive pride or self-assertion. For many women and other marginalized groups, sin is manifested in the “negation of the self,” in “failing fully to become a self,” and in “hiding.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of think-

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the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1620 as a purely civil institution. See Peter J. Gomes, “For Massachusetts, a Chance and a Choice,” *Boston Globe*, February 8, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay I use *queer* as an inclusive term to describe people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex and/or are questioning their sexualities.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, original sin, for me, is not so much about our primal parents’ disobedience but, rather, about their falling into shame and hiding themselves from God as a result of that shame (see Gen. 3:7, 10). Redemption is being restored to humanity’s original state of shamelessness about who God created us to be (see Gen. 2:25).

<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71.

<sup>5</sup> See Gershen Kaufman and Lev Raphael, *Coming Out of Shame: Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 6.

<sup>6</sup> See, respectively, Valerie Saiving Goldstein, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (April 1960): 109; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press



ing of oneself too highly, sin in this context is the failure to think highly enough of oneself.

The foregoing discussion of shame and sin is particularly relevant for queer people of color, who suffer from multiple sources of shame. For example, as a queer Asian man, I have experienced shame for being gay within a predominantly straight Asian American community. For many Asian Americans, homosexuality is incompatible with traditional cultural values of honoring one's biological family and ancestors. This attitude is even stronger in Asian American evangelical circles, where pastors have condemned same-sex marriage as a "mad human disease" and have warned that it will lead to the "extinction of the entire human race" unless the United States repents.<sup>7</sup> This condemnation has been particularly painful for those of us who are rejected by our own faith communities and the families that we love.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to experiencing shame from the Asian American community, I have also experienced shame for being Asian American within a predominantly white queer community. Despite the proliferation of the queer media in recent years (for example, there are at least four weekly queer publications in New York City alone), stories and images about queer Asians rarely appear in queer newspapers, magazines, or television shows. We are routinely ignored in—and sometimes kept out of—queer clubs, bars, and Internet chat rooms. One white gay man wrote on a popular Web site that he wanted to know where he could go clubbing without "being harassed by tons of creepy Asians . . . [who lack] eyelids and real noses."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this invisibility and marginalization that queer Asians experience from the larger white queer community compounds our feelings of shame about our bodies and ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of experiencing shame from these multiple sources, many of us queer Asians downplay our sexualities as well as our ethnicities and try to "pass" within the various communities in which we live. This takes a great toll, both psychologically and emotionally, on our lives. A critical part of the healing process for queer Asians is to be liberated from this shame and to assert our love for ourselves just as we are. This is why the act of coming out and pride celebrations are so important for queer Asians as well as queer people every-

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of America, 1980), 175; and Susan Nelson Dunfee, "The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride," *Soundings* 65, no. 5 (Fall 1982): 317.

<sup>7</sup> See Elena Shore, "Some from Ethnic Communities Vocal against Gay Marriage," New California Media report, news analysis, June 7, 2004, [http://news.ncmonline.com/news/view\\_article.html?article\\_id=c76120f9bd844ba78ddab4e4f327992a](http://news.ncmonline.com/news/view_article.html?article_id=c76120f9bd844ba78ddab4e4f327992a).

<sup>8</sup> For online resources for queer Asians of faith, see the Queer Asian Spirit Web site, at <http://www.queerasianspirit.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> See David Noh, "Boiling Rice," *New York Blade*, December 27, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> For online resources that describe this aspect of the queer Asian experience, see the Gay Asian Pacific Support Network Web site, at <http://www.gapsn.org/project2/history/>.

where. By proclaiming to the world that we are worthy, we refuse to hide and are liberated from our shame.

Same-sex marriages serve a function for queer people similar to that of coming out and pride celebrations, because they also liberate us from our shame and pervasive sense of inferiority. These rites have sacramental value, however, because they are a public proclamation of our holiness before our families, our communities, and God.<sup>11</sup> Instead of hiding our relationships from others, we are able to celebrate them openly and with pride. Through the sacrament of same-sex marriage, queer shame is transformed into queer power.

As I mentioned earlier, my partner, Michael, and I formalized our relationship four years ago with a holy union ceremony in our congregation in New York City. Although we already had been together for nearly nine years at that point, we had never exchanged vows in public or in private. More than one hundred of our family members, friends, and fellow parishioners attended the ceremony. Even though the blessing of our union was not considered a marriage under the ecclesial or civil laws at that time, we considered ourselves to be married before God.

Our ceremony represented a wonderful coming together of the Asian American and queer aspects in my life. By making a public statement about our love in the presence of my family and friends, not only did I stop hiding my queerness from my Asian American family, but I also stopped hiding my Asian American identity from my queer family. I affirmed both aspects of my life before God. I no longer felt ashamed of who I was.

In closing, I suggest that communities of faith should create additional sacramental rites or liturgies that will liberate even more queer people from shame. There is an amazingly broad spectrum of relationships that exist within the queer community, ranging from celibate friendships to monogamous couples to sexually open couples to short-term hookups to long-term fuck buddies to group-sex communities to polyamorous relationships. As an essay in the gay magazine *Instinct* recently noted about queer people, "We are not the mainstream, we are unique in our affect, our interests and the way we express our love."<sup>12</sup>

Ethicist Kathy Rudy has pointed out that what is often considered by many to be merely "anonymous, promiscuous, or nonrelational sex" actually has a strong relational component to it.<sup>13</sup> It is time for communities of faith to ex-

<sup>11</sup> A queer rite has sacramental value insofar as it is a "means of grace" or a "revelation of God's tender loving care" for queer people. See Chris Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacrament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 7.

<sup>12</sup> See Jay Ramsey, "Where Do You Fall in the Gay Marriage Debate? Hearing Warning Bells," *Instinct*, June 2004, 85.

<sup>13</sup> See Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), 77.



pand their same-sex marriage rites and to develop additional liturgies that recognize the multiplicity of relationships in the queer community. Such recognition would liberate *all* queer people, not just long-term couples, from shame. For me, that would truly be a step in the right direction in the quest for relational justice.

#### RESPONSE

*Martha Ackelsberg and Judith Plaskow*

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Three days before marriage was legalized in Massachusetts on May 17, 2004, we wrote an op-ed piece, "Why We're Not Getting Married," which appeared on the Web site of CommonDreams.org and which we expanded slightly for publication in a chain of gay newspapers.<sup>1</sup> The article, which we reproduce here, makes clear that we substantially agree with Mary Hunt.

We love each other, and we've been in a committed relationship for nearly twenty years. We are residents of Massachusetts. But we're not getting married. We fully believe that gays and lesbians should have the right to marry, and we celebrate the fact that a significant barrier to our full citizenship has fallen. In not taking advantage of this new right, however, we can more comfortably advocate for the kind of society in which we would like to live.

Those who have fought for gay marriage have made clear that, in the U.S., important benefits are tied to marital status. As the judges of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, themselves, noted in the *Goodridge* decision, "marriage provides an abundance of legal, financial, and social benefits." Indeed, over 1000 federal benefits attach to marriage—benefits relating to social security, inheritance, tax status, child custody, and the like. Further, other significant benefits—most notably, health care—are often linked to marriage. Opening up this status to gays and lesbians makes an enormous difference to those in committed relationships in which at least one partner has access to benefits, or resources to share.

But focusing on the right to marry perpetuates the idea that these rights ought to be linked to marriage. Were we to marry, we would be contributing to the perpetuation of a norm of coupledness in our society. The norm marginalizes those who are single, single parents, widowed, divorced or otherwise living in non-traditional constellations. The Massachusetts decision argued that "marriage is a vital social insti-

<sup>1</sup> Martha Ackelsberg and Judith Plaskow, "Why We're Not Getting Married," CommonDreams.org, <http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0601-10.htm>, June 1, 2004; and [www.nyblade.com/2004/6-4/viewpoint/opinion/why.cfm](http://www.nyblade.com/2004/6-4/viewpoint/opinion/why.cfm).