

Letter to the Editor

Marriage history misperceived

I write not to complain about your coverage of the Gay Marriage Debate, but as a historian of U.S. history, to alert students to the utter falsehood of Ms. Gallagher's statements about the historical meaning of marriage, which she characterizes as having had one unchanging meaning, and that was to have a heterosexual couple raise children. There are abundant scholarly works on the history of marriage in the United States, none of which Ms. Gallagher seems to have read. Her views, as reported in the Beacon, not only lack empirical support, but fly in the face of the historical facts, which are undisputed.

State regulated marriage became part of colonial-era civil society for practical and economic reasons, primarily to ensure clear lines of inheritance at a time when children born outside of a marriage were not entitled to inherit from their father. Protecting the passing of family wealth — not nurturing children — was the primary reason the state “regulated” marriage, so that it was clear whether parents had, in fact, been legally married. For the same reason, the colonies instituted marriage as monogamous, a restriction on the definition of marriage that was then rare across the entire world. But monogamy was instituted for the same economic and practical reasons that the state intervened in marriage in the first place. At a time when clergymen might visit rural or remote communities only once a year, if that, Americans relied on the state's definition of marriage, not that of their religious faith, to decide which children deserved inheritance or which “wife” would receive a deceased spouse's pension.

Similarly, “childhood” is a modern idea and not a historical explanation for why marriage

seems was structured as heterosexual. Until the 19th century, many parents sent their young children to apprentice and live with another family, whom they paid to train their child in some type of skilled labor (for boys; domestic work for girls). Our current notion that “children” are a distinct category of people whose development needs parental nurturing is only about 100 years old. That is one reason why — well into the 20th century — Americans did not view child labor as a social problem.

What “marriage” means has changed constantly in the United States. Various groups of Americans, including slaves, freed black people, Indians and Mormons, have not been permitted to legally marry in the past, as a way to both legally and symbolically assert their exclusion from American citizenship. And while everyone knows what it means to be married, no two marriages are alike — some spouses understand themselves to be equal partners; others believe in non-monogamy; and still other marriages are simply economic arrangements that have nothing to do with love or raising a family. Marriage laws have never included a requirement that spouses intend to reproduce.

I teach a history seminar every spring that includes the history of marriage, and I encourage all of you interested in the issue of “gay marriage” to seek out accurate and reliable scholarly information before you reach an opinion or are asked to cast a vote for or against it.

— *Dr. Lynn Sacco is an associate professor in history. She can be reached at lsacco@utk.edu.*

10.13.2011

39.118