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Essay #3 Explanatory Summary  
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A Radical Proposal in Conservative Attire?

Andrew Sullivan, in “Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage,” originally printed in *The New Republic* of August 28, 1989, argues for full legitimization and recognition of homosexual marriage. However, what is interesting and new about this journalistic essay is not that a gay intellectual is arguing on behalf of equal rights for homosexual relationships, but the form of his argument. Sullivan does not present a liberal or libertarian brief for his cause, with bright banners demanding, “Don’t Tread on Me!” Rather, he uses the kind of reasoning a political and social conservative might use for other purposes. He argues that full state recognition of gay marriages would support traditional values and institutions, and would be an ally, rather than an enemy, of heterosexual unions.

Sullivan begins by examining a court case wherein a gay person was ruled a member of his deceased partner’s family for purposes of inheritance, in this instance, of a rent controlled apartment in New York. However, the court did nothing to clarify the exact nature of the familial relationship. The concept of family was very broadly defined, and the bench did not address the question of marriage. The author reminds us that a number of urban areas and university towns noted for their liberalism recognize “domestic partnerships,” which provides for many, if not most, of the practical benefits of traditional marriages, such as health insurance, pension rights, and standing to adopt. However, non-married heterosexual couples are equally entitled to these benefits. People, in fact, could just be close friends, Sullivan argues (pars. 1-5).

The author suggests that these kinds of court decisions and local policies are more of a threat to the institution of marriage than would be the legalization and recognition of homosexual unions. He reasons that marriage is an “anchor” to society and that that there should be commitment and responsibility as is asked, and sometimes legally required, of married people. Sullivan asserts that marriage should be extended further to shore up this institution as a social stabilizer. Since all the liberal rulings and policies concerning homosexual relationships equally benefit, and thus encourage, according to Sullivan, non-married heterosexuals, the family is weakened thereby. Since the family is an important bulwark to social stability, society is thus undermined. Society also should support the family, for its own good, but the New Right’s criticism of different kinds of people seemingly because they are merely different from most of the population has clouded this point, the author argues (pars. 6-7).

Having presented his case that an absence of recognition of marriage between gays, which confers both rights and responsibilities, can actually undermine family values, Sullivan discusses gay attitudes about marriage. He notes that many gays, especially those with an activist history, consider marriage an institution against which they are rebelling and against which they ought to rebel. On the other hand, Sullivan thinks that at least as many, if not most, gay people want to fit into normal society and lead lives similar to those of most straight folk. He briefly mentions the AIDS epidemic, suggesting that many gays want to be monogamous and responsible, understanding that not to be so may lead to sickness and death, as well as away from a happy emotional life (par. 8).

Sullivan goes on to assert that marriage would be fairer to homosexual couples than domestic partnerships, because in some ways the latter status is more complicated and harder to qualify for, requiring more release of private information and “elaborate” declarations of the couple’s intentions. Marriage would serve the same purposes for gay people as for straight, including the raising of children. Sullivan asserts that there is “no reason” this could not occur. Furthermore, public declarations of commitment and love have become more and more common on the part of homosexual partners, so full legitimization of gay marriage would foster a trend that is positive on mental, social, and physical levels. The author points out that those who are concerned about promiscuity, that is, those who are more conservative about issues of sexuality, should, from a logical standpoint, support legalization of same sex unions (pars. 9-11).

Toward the end of his essay, Andrew Sullivan takes on the contention that the existence of fully legitimate gay married people would threaten heterosexual wedlock. He argues that this would not be the case, because straight persons would still have the same motivations to get married and have families that they do now. He ironically appeals to our sense of how strong our orientations are by pointing out that heterosexual people would not desire to enter into homosexual marital ties just because it was possible to do so. On the other hand, gays could stop living lies in straight marriages, which hurt themselves and others, and settle down with persons they really wanted to be with. In any event, Sullivan asks, since gay people are not going to go away, why not help them lead lives that are more positive? They could be integrated into their own larger families of origin more easily with open recognition, and young homosexuals could have good role models for growing up (pars. 12-15).

I think Sullivan’s argument is an important one because he gives us the mental exercise of looking at an issue we Americans, particularly, are having a difficult time being reasonable about. The AIDS epidemic of the eighties made us aware of gay promiscuity because it was spread quickly among gay people who had multiple partners. But it might not have occurred to us that heterosexuals could also spread this disease with rapidity or that homosexuals might be capable of the kind of devotion called for in wedding vows or for living stable, monogamous lives. Sullivan is taking advantage of an increasing awareness of these latter truths to propose legal marriage for homosexuals. He does not present us with any statistics or hard data to support what he says, of course. But he makes us curious about these things and want to investigate them further. It would be interesting to see what serious study has unearthed about homosexual and heterosexual marriage and whether being gay or straight makes one a better “life partner.”

Work Cited

Sullivan, Andrew. “Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage.”

Orig. pub. 1989. *Gendered Voices: Readings from the American Experience*. Ed.

Karin Bergstrom Costello. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1996. 449-452. Print.

Links to Sullivan’s piece on the internet:

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/79054/here-comes-the-groom>

<http://sullivanarchives.theatlantic.com/homosexuality.php>