

# Further Thoughts in Response to Gay Marriage Commentary

James Lawrence

The spirited level of dialog generated by my original *Messenger* article last November,\* in which I shared a little bit of my personal journey as to how I became supportive of performing ceremonies blessing the love commitment between two members of the same sex, indicates that our denomination is pretty much lock-and-step with the rest of religious America. Most major communions within the Christian, Jewish, and even Buddhist realms have been experiencing heated debate not only over the question of gay marriage, but also over ordination of openly gay ordinands. Our discussion in the pages of *The Messenger* is more than timely since delegates will be voting this summer for the first time on the ordination of an openly gay candidate for ministry in the General Convention.

I wish, not to respond to all of the points made by each of the contributors, but simply to offer some follow-up thoughts that I feel moved to contribute, now that the issue seems to have had a lengthy (though far from comprehensive) hearing. Twelve letters were published over the course of five issues of *The Messenger*, with eight basically in support of the San Francisco congregation's decision to conduct gay marriage ceremonies and four fundamentally opposed. Of the four opposed, only Duane Beougher of St. Louis provided actual reasoned and dispassionate points, and for that I thank him.

In the Swedenborgian world, there is an *a priori* matter to be considered: are the writings of Swedenborg the last word for Swedenborgians on this issue? I will own up to the truth that I do not regard Swedenborg as infallible on all matters, because there are ways in which he seems clearly limited by the horizons of human knowledge and suppositions of his day. For instance, I do not enjoy defending *Earths in the Universe*, with its declaration that there is intelligent human life on many of the planets of our solar system. I am well aware of

the creative (and to me, far-fetched) theories put forth by Swedenborgians to explain away its obvious problems, as early in this century this work became increasingly scandalous as astronomy advanced.

I also find it interesting that with all his vast wanderings in the spiritual world, and even with his encounters with those who in the world lived in Tartary (the Mongolian region), Swedenborg never seems to have run across a Buddhist or a Hindu in heaven. I suspect that is because knowledge of the religious beliefs of the Far East had not penetrated Europe. He mentions Mohammed many times, because he is familiar with him, but the Buddha is never mentioned, because those texts had not been translated into European languages. Swedenborg discovers in the spiritual worlds only members of religious traditions with whom he is already familiar in this world. He manages to find spiritual beings from other planets, but he never mentions the most numerous spiritual adherents on earth at the time. It seems obvious that his perception was limited in some ways by what he already knew from his natural life, which also explains why he linked beings that he perceived were not from our world to other worlds in our solar system, because the solar system was perhaps his most highly developed academic specialty at one time (he was once offered the Chair of Astronomy at the University of Upsala).

I believe Swedenborg had the most capable human mind in the annals of human experience into which the Lord was able to shine the most profound and comprehensive wisdom ever given through one soul. But that still does not make him infallible. So let me put it right out there: I do not look to the writings as the ultimate determinant for my theological position on the nature of homosexuality. Outwardly gay people were as nonexistent as Hindus in Swedenborg's Stockholm. There is simply not enough careful consideration with the subject in Swedenborg for me to be comfortable with limiting my theological position

to what I find in his writings, and I even feel it is irresponsible to do so. I made a key admission in my original article, which I would like to repeat: "... it is true that many years ago I became emotionally committed to supporting gay people in the face of what I felt was blatant discrimination. This bias has inspired me to find a higher theological basis that would help me understand my passionate feeling that somehow gay love 'works' in the subtler byways of divine order."

I am well aware that the few lines which can be culled from the Bible and from Swedenborg indicate, in their most obvious literal sense, that homosexual expression is disorderly and even immoral. I simply am unconvinced by that meager testimony in the face of personal and modern social experience with what I consider to be in many ways a very beautiful part of the human community. So I am quite consciously seeking a new theological framework for explaining my "bias," and my highest hope is that I can be part of a discussion that will help us all progress toward a deeper understanding. If it turns out that I have been fundamentally wrong about some things, then I feel that my honesty in the striving will have served our modern need to understand each other better in this the New Age.

I feel a moral obligation as a modern Swedenborgian theologian to wrestle with this matter in a world in which *eros* between two people of the same sex has become common, but not obviously destructive or unhealthy, any more than unhealthy destructiveness often characterizes heterosexuality. "By their fruits you shall know them." My experience of the gay community is that our world has received from this unusual but potent variant expression an immensely creative and positive contribution, which makes for a stronger, more productive *maximus homo*. Homosexual attraction, in which a certain type of conjugality of the masculine and feminine has united within the

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**BAPTISM**

**Kemp**—Kyle Monay Kemp, infant daughter of Sara and Adrian Kemp, was baptized into the Christian church April 13, 1997, at the Virginia Street Swedenborgian Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Rev. Kit Billings officiating. Sara is a daughter of Sylvia Lange, longtime member and organist at Virginia Street church.

**CONFIRMATIONS**

**Alonso, Buteux, Cruz-Gonzalez, Gonzalez, Shakalis**—Ilia Gonzalez Alonso, Sara Buteux, Zayda Cruz-Gonzalez, Jose E. Gonzalez, and William Shakalis were confirmed into the life of the Swedenborgian Church Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997, at the Cambridge Swedenborgian Church, the Rev. F. Robert Tafel officiating.

**Dugan, Sass**—Twyla Dugan and Tammy Sass were confirmed into the life of the Swedenborgian Church December 1, 1996, at the LaPorte New Church (Swedenborgian) in LaPorte, Indiana, the Rev. Eric Hoffman officiating.

**Poznak**—Michelle Poznak was confirmed into the life of the Swedenborgian Church March 2, 1997, at the LaPorte New Church, the Rev. Eric Hoffman officiating.

**Rennier**—Richard and Debbi Rennier were confirmed into the life of the Swedenborgian Church March 9, 1997, at the LaPorte New Church, the Rev. Eric Hoffman officiating.

**Robbins**—Michael S. Robbins was confirmed into the life of the Swedenborgian Church and welcomed into membership January 26, 1997, at the New York Swedenborgian Church, the Rev. Robert McCluskey officiating.

**MARRIAGE**

The Rev. Kit B. Billings and the Rev. Mary Beth Sarhatt were united in marriage April 24, 1997, at the Kemper Road Swedenborgian Church in Montgomery, Ohio, the Revs. John Billings and Meg Hess officiating.

**DEATHS**

**Cutler**—Dorothy Winslow Randall Cutler, 98, entered the spiritual world March 14, 1997, in Westminster Village in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Dorothy was baptized at the Boston Swedenborgian Church October 1, 1898, by the Rev. James Reed, and was confirmed and elected into membership April 7, 1918. She was married to Edward Hutchins Cutler at Rockport, Mass., by the Rev. William F. Wunsch. A memorial was conducted at Westminster Village; burial followed in Memorial Park Cemetery. A memorial service is planned at the Boston Church of the New Jerusalem. Our love is extended to William Cutler and Mary Wagner.

**Harvey**—John Harvey, brother of the Rev. Dr. Dorothea Harvey died April 1997, at the age of 81. A small private service was conducted May 24, in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

**Regamey**—Peggy Regamey, 90, longtime member of the Boston Swedenborgian Church, entered the spiritual world April 19, 1997, in Westbrook, Maine. Peggy was the wife of the late Rev. Anthony Regamey, former minister of the Boston church. She is survived by her children, Joyce Bicknell, Patricia Vigue and David Regamey. A memorial service is planned for summer.

**Sigle**—Marcia Sigle, 77, of LaPorte, Indiana, entered the spiritual world March 29, 1997. She was in the process of moving to Colorado to be closer to her family and the mountains, both of which were spiritual inspirations for her. A service of remembrance was conducted at the LaPorte New Church April 11, 1997, the Rev. Eric Hoffman officiating.

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relationship, may be a variant expression that has always been a possible, but largely suppressed expression within the divine order of the masculine-feminine interplay. But as with many aspects of human development, this possibility has flowered in the spiritually freer environment of the New Age.

In particular, I have developed the theory that a variant of the conjugal principle occurs naturally with many gay people. The basic building block for the conjugal attraction is stated early on in *Congugial Love* (n.32)—namely, that the male soul is inwardly love with an exterior motive expression through wisdom, while the female soul is the reverse, setting up a yin-yang complementarity that is but the human version of an attraction principle holding together everything that exists. I think that this dynamic manifests in many variations of strength with males and females across the spectrum of billions of individuals, and I find it unconvincing that roles never reverse in the variations of the natural order. As human life both biologically and psychologically has become more complex (which I trust is by providential design), I see increasing diversity in possibilities. Since in my real experience the homosexual population clearly enhances life, my hunch is that this fundamental building block of the divine *esse* (the conjugal attraction) can even manifest in combinations (though still rarely—maybe 2-3% of the time) in which the complementarity is happening between two members of the same biological sex. I remain open to further discussion and inquiry, but in my experience with real people, I now believe that gay love, as is also true of heterosexual love, is profaned or made sacred by the integrity of the individuals involved. That is why I am willing to bless gay marriage commitments. It's as simple (and complex) as that. ❖

\* "Risking on the Side of Compassion"

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