Sacred Union Ceremonies: How Gnostics mimic marriage

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The Sacred Union Ceremony

On 12 June 2010 a sacred union ceremony, organised by Uniting Network Australia, was held at Brunswick Uniting Church in Melbourne to bless same-sex couples in committed relationships. Robed clergy officiated, a sermon was preached, vows were exchanged, certificates signed and a wedding cake provided. The following day President Alistair Macrae received a copy of the liturgy used in the ceremony and advised UNA leaders that 'if they want clarity in this matter they should consider the usual church processes for introducing it through the Councils of the Church for discussion, discernment and debate.' (Correspondence 20/7/10, *ACCatalyst* August 2010, Vol 4, No 4, p13)

In the light of decisions at the 2003 and 2006 Assemblies that implicitly accepted same-sex relations among ordained ministers as a legitimate form of diversity in the UCA, it is not surprising that formal recognition of same-sex relationships is now sought. UNA is highly likely to bring a recommendation on this matter to the Thirteenth Assembly, 15-21 July 2012.

As the UCA has never given theological reasons for these seismic changes to the Reformed doctrine of sexuality and marriage, it is necessary to try to understand why something so recently regarded as inimical to human flourishing is now strongly supported and promoted as a positive good and an inalienable right.

From Christian Orthodoxy to Gnostic Spirituality

The answer is to be found in the shift from Christian patterns of thought to those based on new forms of Gnostic spirituality – an abstract, other worldly philosophy that was parasitic on orthodox Christian belief and focussed on esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) of the spiritual world that is accessible to people when they look deep within themselves.[1]

Until recently considered to be a relic of a bygone age, and an escape from a robust secular faith, the resurgence of Gnostic spirituality within and beyond the churches is remarkable. Bookshops testify to this explosion of interest. Churches create 'sacred spaces' in which to meditate. The simultaneous collapse of Christianity and modernity – which had competed with, and complemented, each other in shaping Western patterns of reality – has led to interest in older spiritual resources found deep within the self.

A new paradigm, centred on spiritual self-knowledge and impatient with Christian and humanist claims to know the truth, began to evolve. The deconstructionists, looking for other sources to provide a framework for meaning, found inspiration in reappraising Gnostic spirituality. There they discovered what they hated in their oppressive, patriarchal, heterosexist, credal and institutionalized beliefs and practices. They sought special spiritual knowledge not bound by restrictions, immediately accessible and connected to the 'divine.'

Although Gnostic systems of belief are not easy to pin down, their key tenets are clear:

1. ***Belief in the superiority of mind or consciousness over matter***. The physical, material, bodily world is inferior to the life of the psyche. To think that God's creation, as affirmed in Scripture, is essentially good is to live in ignorance. Special knowledge is required to open our eyes to the truth –that the 'divine spark' is within us, enabling us to realise who we are without reality being mediated by events, physical realities, customs, Scripture, commandments, creeds or institutions. We can experience the divine within.

2. ***The rejection of the Judeo-Christian duality between God and world***. 'God' and humanity are not separate but part of each other. Therefore, we don't have to look outside ourselves for healing, enlightenment or redemption. Salvation comes when ignorance about the true nature of reality is overcome by recognising that divinity is within us or that we are divine. Gnostic belief that 'All is One' (i.e. monism) replaces faith in God's redemptive love mediated through Christ to those who, unlike God, are neither righteous nor divine.

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[1] See Philip Lee, *Against Protestant Gnosticism* (1987: Oxford University Press, Oxford); Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (); Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (1992: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company; Phillipsburg, New Jersey); *Pagans in the Pews* (2001: Regal Books, Ventura, California)

Naturally, therefore, Gnostics rejected the Christian affirmation that, in order to redeem sinful humanity to God, *'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.'* The incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and the created bodiliness of human beings, are barriers to spiritual insight and personal liberation.

3. ***The non-literal interpretation of Scripture and historical events***. Finding deep symbolic meaning of texts, which are viewed through the prism of the divinely indwelt psyche, is a sign of spiritual wisdom. The meaning of events is to be found in what they say about the 'God or divinity within. For example, Jesus' resurrection is not to be understood as *God's* action defeating the power of sin and death but as the renewal of *our* personality and the ability to recognise our own inner capacity for divinity.

4. ***Spiritual elitism***. As knowledge of the divine within is not obvious to our senses, and requires special illumination, Gnosticism is *elitist*. Our ignorant minds must be trained by the enlightened to see the spiritual meaning of things beyond the mere appearances of the material, physical, bodily, sensual world so that we can discover the truth about our own inherent divinity.

Gnostic Sexuality

These characteristics are evident in the Gnostic approach to 'sexuality,' The unambiguous witness of Scripture to God's purposes for humanity in the complementary humanity of male and female, and their sexual union in marriage, is 'transformed' from its 'literal' to the deeper spiritual meaning. No longer is sex to be understood so ignorantly. The enlightened person will see that, in place of the rigid differentiation of male and female, and the restriction of marriage to men and women, we should celebrate the inner spiritually that we share. Sacred psychic unity, a spiritual meeting of minds, is the vital thing in sexual unions!

In *Against Protestant Gnostics* Philip Lee shows how this way of thinking allows Gnostics to be flexible on sex. 'Although gnostics were divided in their attitudes toward sexual practice, some being very puritanical, others libertine, all gnostics were united in their ingrained suspicion of procreation.' (p201) This Gnostic commitment to spiritual, and sexual, androgyny is typical of supporters of *The Jesus Seminar* (1993) and 'Progressive Christianity' who regard the *Gospel of Thomas* as the 'Fifth Gospel.' If that is true, what is to be made of these texts which contradict the clear testimony of Scripture?

'Js said to them, "Shall you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female, … then you will enter the kingdom."' (Saying 22)

'Jesus said to Peter, "I myself shall lead her (Mary) in order to make her male, so that *she too may become a living spirit resembling you males*. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."' (Final Saying 114; my italics)

However distasteful to us is the sexism of saying 114, Gnosticism's distaste for sexual differentiation is very clear. The distinction between male and female is to be overcome in a spiritual unity found in the depths of our self-consciousness. Our psyches or minds are superior to the body! We must get beyond the bondage of sexual distinctions – and reject the creational sexuality of Genesis 1-2, Romans 1:18-32 and Galatians 3:28 in favour of androgyny, which is 'the sexual expression of a deeply religious agenda, that of pagan monism.' (P. Jones, *Pagans in the Pews*, p185) In such a schema, human beings do not need to be redeemed from improper sexual or other behaviour. They must simply follow the leading of their own inner spirituality.

Different Gospels

Therefore, despite current attempts by 'progressive Christians' to align Gnosticism with biblical Christianity, it is clear that we are dealing with *'different Gospels.'* The 'new faith' of Dr Macnab treats historic Christian faith in the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord as unbelievable and primitive literalism, thus refashioning the old Gnosticism. Spiritual knowledge and psychological well-being are to be found by releasing the divine energies within. As long as we are doing that, our preferred sexual unions will be appropriately 'sacred.'

The incompatibility of Gnostic spirituality and orthodox Christianity must first be noted if we are to engage in a serious theological debate about the merits of same-sex 'marriage,' civil unions or blessing services. It is increasingly the case that, in our post-modern age, *a person's essence* isn't thought of primarily as a

physical, biological and spiritual unity but as the *'consciousness'* that resides in a suit of flesh. What I choose to do in my body – as a chaste, hetero, homo or bi sexual person isn't thought to affect my essential identity. Therefore, it is considered right if, in good faith, I choose to take part in a consensual sexual relationship with a person of the same sex. My essential identity – my mind, psyche or consciousness – is not affected.

One of the effects of locating the essential being of a person in the mind is to treat biological differences as psychological differences! In the new androgynous humanity 'each partner in relationships, both hetero- and homosexual, in encouraged to recognize validity of both masculine and feminine, the yang and the yin, in himself or herself.' (P. Jones, *The Gnostic Empire strikes back*, p60) Theological, physiological and social differences between men and women are turned into *'states of mind'* within all individuals, thus deconstructing the Christian understanding of sex and marriage in line with Gnostic spirituality.[2]

It has been a triumph of the militant homosexual lobby to change the terms of debate from 'sex' to 'gender' – a move that corresponds to Gnostic fascination with blurring the boundaries between God and the world, men and women, truth and falsehood, Scripture and faith so typical of our post-modern, post-Christian age. Once this shift was effected, the old 'rigidities' could be demonised, clearing the way for the promotion and endorsement of more 'flexible' sexual unions.

In the light of these considerations, it would be naïve to think that the push for same-sex 'marriage' is actually driven by the desire for equal recognition with marriages between men and women. Gnostic thinking inevitably leads to the refashioning of marriage between a man and a woman *in the image of the androgynous person*. Marriage is being subverted so that the sanctity of sexual unions are determined, not by the complementarity physiology and relationality of male and female, but by the compatibility of their inner-spirituality.

Marriage between a man and a woman thus becomes one form of 'sacred union' – a term derived from pagan rites against which Christianity previously protested. Make no mistake! The promotion of 'Gay Marriage' in community and the Church is not a call to make marriage more 'inclusive.' Marriage between a man and a woman will now become one form – an inferior and rigid form – of androgynous marriage. Homosexual unions, emphasising individuality, equality and consent will be the benchmark for true 'marriage' – thus undermining the special relationship created by God for human flourishing. The 'de-gendering' of the vows in the sacred union ceremony ('partner') is intended to de-construct marriage and transform it into an 'institution' based on androgynous egalitarianism.

In remarks that foreshadow the deconstruction of Christian marriage and orthodoxy, M. Fox says that, in some respects, homosexuality is superior to hetero-sexuality because it is not productive but playful (cited in PJ, PP p170 fn 52); Bishop Spong says that 'feminism and homosexuality lie at the heart and soul of what the Gospel is about.' (Ibid fn 53) This is pure Gnosticism! The structured God-given relationships that have been created for human flourishing and fidelity, and the dangers of moving outside these liberating parameters, are dismissed out of hand. In their place a false 'Gospel' is proclaimed – promoting a new pagan ethics that is built on recognising the spirituality that dwells within our individual consciousnesses.

Pastoral Liturgy for Sacred Unions

In September 2010, following the ceremony on 12 June 2010, UNA published a pastoral liturgy for a sacred union ceremony on its website. (Refer www.unitingnetworkaustralia.org.au)

The stated aims of the SUC are:

1. To provide a pastoral service of blessing or marriage for people in committed, same-sex relationships.
2. To encourage a re-consideration of the current policy of the UCA on the doctrine of marriage.' (pp 4&5)

[2] In this respect, the influence of C. Jung, whose 'archetypes' in the mind, including the integration of male and female 'types,' has been instrumental in minimising the significance of our complementary physiology for understanding sexual relationships, thus translating interpersonal relationships into intrapersonal states of mind.

While saying that the SUC 'is not intended to be and should not be presented as a Marriage Service' (p5), the UNA deliberately 'adapts' it 'to make it more inclusive by removing references to specific genders' (pp 7&9)

In fact, the liturgy mimics marriage, while, at the same time, its proponents both deny that it is a marriage service and agitate for the redefinition of marriage. 'Heterosexual marriage' as ordained by God is treated as a culturally conditioned arrangement that needs 'to evolve as other patterns for human relating' emerge (p8). It would seem, therefore, that between the SUC in June and the publicising of a SUC in September a decisive shift in emphasis has taken place. Otherwise, it is puzzling to understand the comments of President Alistair Macrae about the June service that 'it will be a matter of personal judgment as to whether the ceremony resembled a marriage ceremony. … in very obvious ways, by any church definition, it was clearly not a marriage service and did not pretend to be.' (*ACCatalyst*, Vol 4, No 4, August 2010, p13)

Despite the President's assessment of the liturgy with which he was presented, the implication of the current UNA proposal is plain. The acceptance of same-sex marriage is designed to radically revise marriage so that, henceforth, it must be understood as a relationship between two individuals, regardless of gender.

The failure of the SUC to recognise the fundamental creation of humanity as male and female, and marriage as the personal and physical union of a man and a woman, is evident in the misrepresentation of the biblical-theological understanding of *Covenant, Love and Inclusion*. This radical revision, which cleverly suggests its conformity to the classical theological tradition, results in the Gnostic deconstruction of God, as attested in Scripture and confessed by the UCA in the *Basis of Union*.

1. The concept of ***'covenant'*** is used misleadingly to imply God's approval of all kinds of binding declarations of commitment (pp 9&10) – 'with family and friends' (p12), as well as God's relationship with Israel and Jesus' followers. In Scripture, however, the covenant with Israel is established by the Holy God who is merciful. In the old covenant, the Hebrews are commanded to behave in a manner that does not imitate the unholy practices of her neighbours, including, among other kinds of misbehaviour, homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13a). This prohibition is not overturned in the new covenant, though, significantly, the guiding principle of Jesus' followers must be the desire that any sinful person, including the sexually immoral, be reconciled to God (egs John 8:1-11; 1 Cor 6:9-20).

The proposed marriage vows in the SUC do not conform to the covenantal nature of marriage according to the 1997 Assembly declaration on marriage. They are radically revised to eliminate references to 'husband' and 'wife' and 'a man and a woman.' This is described as 'the non-gender' or 'de-gendered' approach to the statement of purpose in the UCA marriage service (p 15 inc fn 5, pp 29-30). When the Catholic moral theologian Daniel Maguire's statement that *"Marriage is the highest form of interpersonal commitment and friendship achievable between sexually attracted persons"* (p 5 inc fn 1, p29 & fn 5, pp 29-30) is quoted with approval, the reader is left in no doubt about the ultimate goal of the proponents of the SUC – same-sex marriage that is, at the very least, equivalent to marriage between a man and a woman.

It is misleading, therefore, to claim or imply that the biblical approach to covenant endorses or validates every form of close relationship. In God's covenant with his people, some close relationships are forbidden. The failure of the proposal to discuss the significance of marriage between a man and a woman for a correct understanding of the biblical covenant, and the portrayal of same-sex relationships between David and Jonathan and Ruth and Naomi as typical of loving, faithful covenantal relationships, is striking. The slightest suggestion that this kind of relationship involved same-sex intercourse would have been sufficient to warrant harsh judgment, given the clear prohibition in the Hebrew covenant.

Moreover, on this view of covenant, it is unclear on what basis the proponents of SUCs for same-sex couples could preclude SUCs for people in other now prohibited sexual relationships. Presumably, they, too, are conditioned by outdated cultural mores. If individuality, consent and sexual fulfilment are sufficient grounds on which to approve covenantal relationships between same-sex marriages then it is logical to also prepare liturgies for people in polyamorous, polygamist and adult incestuous relationships.

2. This brings us to the concept of ***'love'*** used throughout the proposed liturgy. Much is said about 'honouring' and 'sharing' love in a life-long covenantal relationship. 'Love' is treated as a generic commitment that has many forms, all of which are created and sustained by God. Although the bible

readings suggested for the SUC rightly focus on the love of God, and our calling to love one another, they do not include texts about false loves that undermine the case for same-sex marriage (pp 16&17). Sexual and other loves can be harmful, even when the attraction is mutual and consensual. It is noteworthy that Gen 1:26ff and Mark 10:6-9 are ignored. References to 1 Jn 4:7-8&16 (p10) conveniently forget the accompanying warnings not to do what is wrong. (1 Jn 3:8; 5:16f; 3 Jn v11)

The assumption that 'love' overcomes culturally conditioned limits (like male-female marriage) also leads them to blur the distinction between different forms of love, and to misrepresent what Paul says in Galatians 3:28 (p12). The affirmation that, in Christ, there is *'no male and female'* is a recognition, radical for its day, of the equal dignity of men and women before God. It does not mean that sexual relations between people of the same sex are now to be encouraged and celebrated (eg 1 Cor 6:9ff).

The essential character of God's love in Scripture is not accepting but redemptive – love that forgives sinners, reconciles them to God and calls them to follow the crucified and risen Christ in lives of righteousness that exceed, but do not contradict, the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 5:20).

3. The appeal to ***social inclusion*** shows that the SUC is dependent, not on Scripture, but Gnostic ideas of equality. In biblical theology 'inclusion' is understood in the light of God's love for sinners. Through the covenant revealed to Israel and embodied in Christ, the nations are called to repentance. The Holy Spirit enables sinful men and women to delight in the redemptive love of God by living-out the new way of righteousness (Mt 5-7) in relation to Christ. Unlike Gnostic inclusion, biblical inclusion welcomes all nations while discerning the difference between right and wrong. Thus exclusive attachment to Christ, and his righteousness, is the basis on which all sinners are invited to confess him as Lord of heaven and earth.

In relation to sex and marriage, the new righteousness embodied exclusively in Christ prohibits same-sex sexual relationships, within or outside 'committed relationships.' The ideas that underpin the SUC thus privilege the Gnostic form of 'inclusion,' and reject the biblical distinction between incompatible forms of 'inclusion.' It is not clear why, according to this way of thinking, the SUC should be restricted to two people, either of the same or opposite sex. In order to be consistent, and uphold the principle of equality, the UNA must eventually also encourage marriages, civil unions or blessings between multiple partners. To do otherwise would be to exclude people who are committed to other forms of God-given love.

4. The ***'theological language'*** in the SUC is used deceptively. The same terms for 'God' are used but, taken out of biblical context, they mean something entirely different. Phrases like 'whom God has called together,' 'faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,' 'God whose name is love,' 'one people in Christ,' 'may your holy spirit empower them' etc assume compatibility of the SUC with Scripture and the UCA marriage service. In fact, what they claim divine warrant for is incompatible with what is meant by 'God,' 'Christ' and the 'Spirit' in the bible and the service. The Gnostic 'god' trumps God's self-revelation in Scripture.

Conclusion

The presuppositions that underpin the SUC liturgy are derived, not from biblical and theological sources, but from Gnostic beliefs that blur the boundaries that enhance human flourishing. They privilege a commitment that is based on individual choice and consent over that which is grounded in the complementary nature of our creation as male and female and its fruition in marriage.

In view of the misuse of the Assembly approved Marriage Service in this proposal, ministers, congregations and Councils of the church, including the Thirteenth Assembly in 2012, should totally reject the SUC liturgy. It mimics marriage in an attempt, not to enhance, but to undermine, radicalise and deconstruct it.

The suggestion that this new service is necessary only for 'pastoral' reasons should also be rejected. 'Pastoral care,' as the Declaration of Purpose in the UCA Marriage Service clearly shows, does not mean endorsing claims to act contrary to Scripture, but teaching and discipline that are compatible with God's self-revelation in Christ, as attested in Scripture.

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