

The Traditionalist Case

Dale Carpenter

Abstract: I will argue that gay marriage is a conservative idea, though many self-described conservatives may be among the last to realize it. Marriage for gay couples, moreover, is conservative in the original and deepest sense of the word: it is traditionalist. Traditionalist conservatism, described most ably in the work of writers like Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, emphasizes the need to respect longstanding practices and traditions; the need for continuity and stability in social institutions; the need to proceed incrementally where change is warranted; the need to be modest and cautious about the powers of reason; and the importance of basing any reform on experience rather than on abstract ideas about the good society.

I will first sketch a traditionalist argument *against* gay marriage rooted in the work of Burke and Oakeshott. Next, I will note some advances in positive knowledge that weaken traditionalist concerns about homosexuals and their relationships. From this base, I will make an affirmative case for marriage for gay Americans. The affirmative case points to both individualistic and communitarian benefits. I will then reconsider the traditionalist objections to gay marriage outlined previously and place the argument for gay marriage within the framework of traditionalist conservative thought. Time permitting, I will suggest how a traditionalist might proceed toward the recognition of gay marriage, with some consideration of the role of legislatures, courts, and marriage-alternatives like civil unions. The traditionalist, I conclude, should resist a “final” answer to gay marriage found in either constitutional solutions that take the form of amendments banning gay marriage or judicial declarations imposing it.