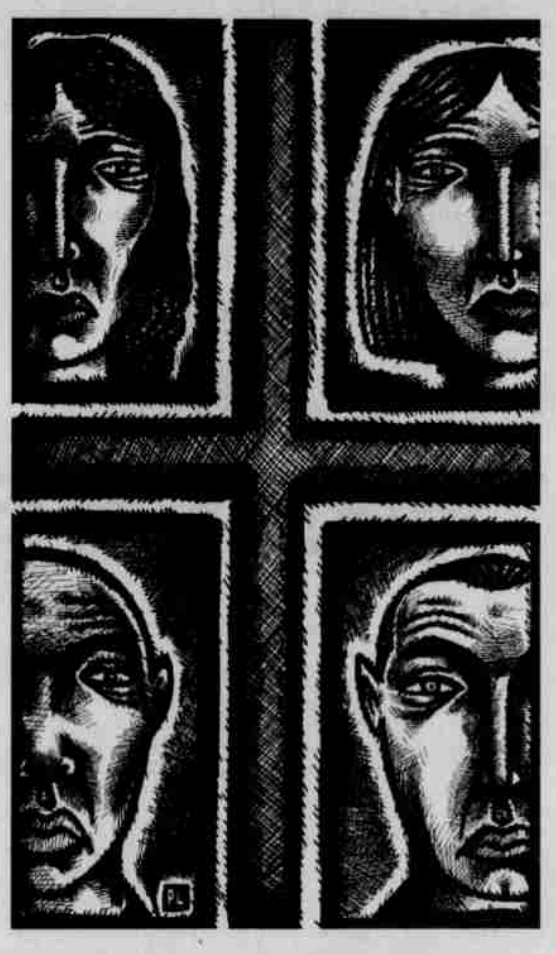
Same-sex marriages should share in the communal identity.

In search of the real thing

By Nathaniel Frank



On March 7, California residents will head to the polls to vote yea or nay on banning same-sex marriages.

Both supporters and opponents have drawn on legal, religious, political and historical arguments. But since marriage depends for its special significance on public approval, nuptial rights for gays and lesbians will be a hollow victory if they are forced on the nation by special interest groups, legal maneuvering or judicial fiat. In the end, for marriage to have real meaning for gays and lesbians, the hearts and minds of the people must be won over.

That's because marriage is, by its nature, a quest for public recognition, in which two people seek the support of their community in honoring their commitment to each other. In discussing civic marriage, we are talking about not just a private bond, but also a group identity, whose meaning is shaped by the assumptions and practices of all those who claim its status.

Marriage is literally meaningless without a public who recognizes the couple by honoring its legal and moral unity. Being married helps us keep our commitments to our spouses *and* our communities by creating a shared identity with very public expectations. It doesn't always work. But every day thousands of people choose to embrace this identity because of the support it helps afford them.

In its civic guise, marriage is a symbolic space that ties together the billions of people whose commitment to their vows strengthens their resolve to honor their own pledge to fidelity. So while each individual marriage is a deal between two people, the shared meaning of marriage is central to the success of individual unions. While there are many marriages, there is only one *marriage*.

This is why gays need access to the real marriage, the one and only *marriage*: so they can join not just each other but also the wider community of committed adults.

Since marriage has always meant different things to different people, its legal definition must be able to accommodate the varied understandings of the institution, while retaining enough form to give it meaning. Surely a Christian, for whom marriage is a holy union under God, should not be allowed to deny atheists the right to marry under civic law. But neither should a man be allowed to marry his sheep, which would so radically alter the common understanding of the institution that it would hinder its public function for everyone else.

It is precisely because marriage is a group identity, that so many Americans worry that legalizing gay marriages would "trivialize" and "demean" the institution. They believe that homosexual unions are inherently immoral or unstable, or that they are not sanctioned by God. They fear that by sharing the symbolic space of marriage with couples whose union they don't trust or respect, the sanctity of heterosexual bonds could be compromised. As U.S. Rep. Henry Hyde (R., Ill.) put it, "If two men want to love each other, go right ahead. But don't take marriage!"

Advocates of same-sex marriage routinely dismiss this fear that marriage can somehow be "taken away" by opening it up to gays and lesbians. They argue that marriage is a private matter not open to judgment by the public.

Yet it is surely a disingenuous argument to seek public recognition of our love on the grounds that it's nobody's business but our own. If legal benefits were all that mattered, gays and lesbians would be satisfied with "domestic partnerships" now being considered in states like Vermont.

But a back-of-the-bus version of marriage cannot possibly offer gay and lesbian unions the same public supports central to the power and success of straight marriages. As history reminds us, separate is inherently unequal.

Gay couples deserve access to the unique institution of marriage — but the argument for granting them this right should not rest on the assertion that one couple's union has no effect on another's.

We are men and women who have shown our capacity to maintain deep, committed relationships, despite the absence of support that straight couples enjoy. The issue is not whether casual marriage commitments can erode the institution; they can. The question is whether gay unions are, by definition, casual. And it's time to answer "no."

Proponents of full equality for gay and lesbian couples should not be arguing that marriage is a purely private matter, unconnected to the public culture we are seeking to join. This line of thinking is both misleading and damaging to the core assumptions underlying our battle: that the recognition of our common humanity is a fundamental requirement of a just society.

Nathaniel Frank is a frequent contributor to the Commentary Page.

Egypt welcomes John Paul II in a long tradition of tolerance

By Mohamed El Bendary

Pope John Paul II's visit to Egypt — the first of two planned tours in the footsteps of Moses and Jesus — is a welcome gesture toward enhancing a Christian-Jewish dialogue and ensuring that Egypt's minority Coptic community is treated justly.

It's also a reminder that Egypt has long served as a symbol of comparative tolerance in the Arab/Islamic community. Egyptian-born myself, I applaud anything that furthers ethnic and religious tolerance in my country of origin.

With religious intolerance on the rise in some parts of the world (more than 200 died in Nigeria in religious clashes over the past week), the Pope's visit is a step toward improving the conversation among Christians, Jews and Muslims. It should also help give a push to the stalled Arab-Israeli peace process.

Many Westerners are unaware that tolerance is a major concern of Islam. Muhammad himself preached tolerance to his people, tolerance to all regardless of ethnic or religious background.

The Egyptian government lately has borne undeserved criticism from Western media for the acts of a few fanatics. Clashes last month between Muslims and Copts in the Egyptian villages of Koshed and Dar e-Salem left 23 people dead, many of whom were Copts; Western reports unfairly portrayed this disaster as business as usual in Egypt.

Since Mubarak assumed power in 1981, Egypt has enjoyed a wider, more democratic system of government, along with a vigorous economy. Mubarak sponsored a law (recently approved by the Egyptian Parliament) that gave Egyptian women equal rights with men by granting them the right to divorce their husbands without first having to prove that they were mistreated.

To anticipate accusations by human rights groups that his government persecutes Christians, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, along with an entourage of Christian and Muslim children, went out to greet the Pope. An editorial in the semiofficial Arabic daily, Al-Ahram, welcomed the Pope to the "land that housed all the prophets and in which all religions flourished."

Since ancient times, Egypt's mosaic of faith has inspired those working for tolerance. It has been the hub of the world's three monolithic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The 11th-century Ben Ezra synagogue (at the purported site where the baby Moses was discovered among bulrushes) and St. Sargius Church (where Mary and Joseph are said to have sheltered the child Jesus as they fled King Herod's oppression) are located there. From the Victorian era through the 1950s, Cairo's cosmopolitan blend of Semitic and European cultures made it the cultural center of the Arab world.

The city houses also the 1,000-year-old al-Azher University — the biggest center of learning in the Muslim world today.

I often return to Egypt, and from the time I land until my holiday ends, I am engulfed by old friends — many of whom are Christians. We never viewed ourselves by our faith, but as Egyptians who share a great passion for the land of the Nile. I visited their churches, and they visited my mosque. The Egyptian flag flew to embrace all of us.

Egyptians (who recently celebrated 7,000 years of civilization) should work harder to set an example for the rest of the world. The Mubarak government should exert all efforts to raise a culture of tolerance among all Egyptians. Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders — be they in the Middle East or America — should work harder together to cleanse humanity of racial hatred and religious persecution. They should continue to push for a worldwide implementation of the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1997, which calls for a ban on exports to countries that carry out religious persecution. Human rights organizations, too, should work harder to ensure that states abide by all provisions contained in international human rights treaties, such as the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Acts.

True, Egypt and the sophisticated Egyptian press should do more to ensure the equal rights of its citizens. But it is also true that by unjustifiably bombarding Cairo with criticism for the sins of some extremists, Egyptians' distrust of the West has been on the rise. And one hopes that the Pope's visit will help bridge this widening gap between the East and the West.

Perhaps we Americans should ponder the words of the Egyptian president when he said in his welcoming remarks to the Pope: "We should strive to fight fanaticism, prejudice and hatred. We should oppose discrimination, injustice and double standard if we are to establish a new world order."

Mohamed El-Bendary (bendary@hotmail.com) writes on foreign-policy affairs from St. Louis.

Tomorrow: "Alarms and Diversions" with David Boldt; Acel Moore takes the "Urban Perspective."

Rodgers and Hammerstein songs remain younger than springtime

By Alvin S. Felzenberg



Richard Rodgers (left) with Oscar Hammerstein 2d.

They changed American musical theater forever. Decades after their deaths, their productions and songs are performed and sung in every corner of the world. Their names are permanently intertwined. Mention of them brings expressions of joy to the sternest countenance.

They were Rodgers and Hammerstein — equal halves of what may have been the most successful collaboration in all of musical history.

Both were born in New York City to upper-middle-class assimilated Jewish families near and after the turn of the last century. Richard Rodgers was son of a doctor, Hammerstein the grandson and namesake of one of the country's foremost promoters of grand opera.

They first met at Columbia University. The 14-year-old star-struck Rodgers asked to meet 21-year-old Hammerstein to tell him how much he had enjoyed the older student's performance in a student production. He had been impressed with Hammerstein's acting ability and taken by the lyrics he had written for the show. With all the warmth and charm that characterized so many of his songs, Hammerstein acted as if nothing were more important to him than his young fan's opinion.

Couples

Standout pairs who embody the 20th century

Soon, Rodgers was at Columbia himself, working both with his idol and with another aspiring lyricist who became his first collaborator: Lorenz Hart.

More than two decades would past before Rodgers and Hammerstein collaborated on a professional basis. Hammerstein spent the intervening years working with Jerome Kern (*Showboat*) and Sigmund Romberg (*The Desert Song*), among others. Rodgers and Hart formed what may have been the most stellar partnership up until Rodgers and Hammerstein. Their credits included *The Boys from Syracuse* and *Pal Joey*.

One of the most versatile of all of America's composers as well as one of its most prolific (he penned more than 900 songs), Richard Rodgers allowed his music to reflect the personalities and moods of his lyricists. Songs by Rodgers and Hart (i.e. "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," "My Funny Valentine," "Where or When?") convey the wit, sophistication and bitter sweetness of Larry Hart. Rodgers and Hammerstein melodies ("Younger than Springtime," "Some Enchanted Evening," "Oh What a Beautiful Morning") suggest the gaiety, hope and optimism of Oscar Hammerstein 2d, as do uplifting songs ("You'll Never Walk Alone" and "Climb Every Mountain") that are as inspirational a Sunday sermon, Norman Vincent Peale or a weekend of self-improvement with Anthony Robbins.

The occasion for Rodgers and Hammerstein's coming together was a script, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (later known as *Oklahoma!*). In the story of pioneer struggles, both saw a chance to rejuvenate their careers. At the time, Hammerstein had not had a hit in over a decade. Rodgers' partnership with Hart — along with Hart's hold on life — was disintegrating.

While their backgrounds were similar, their temperaments were not. Rodgers was morose most of the time, Hammerstein perpetually "up." Their contrasting dispositions brought to their work the tension and the energy that gave rise to some of the most memorable and singable songs ever written.

In their working habits, Rogers and Hammerstein reversed what had been the conventional way of writing songs. Most of their predecessors put words to music. Hammerstein would write the words and send them to his partner by mail or over the telephone from his farm in Doylestown. Rodgers would then write the music. The two would later assemble to refine the finished product.

While Rodgers and Hammerstein's primary focus was on commercial success (they founded a highly successful business empire), their work lives on for its content as well as for its entertainment value. That content is surprisingly profound, with a tendency to social commentary. In *Oklahoma*, they brought to the stage the best of American values (hope, generosity, teamwork). But they also depicted failings in the American or human condition (racism in *South Pacific*; domestic violence in *Carousel*; imperialism, authoritarianism and sexism in *King and I*; conformism in *Flower Drum Song*; the threat of totalitarianism in *Sound of Music*), speaking to the hearts and consciences of their audiences.

Like Norman Rockwell, who also worked in a "commercial" vein and whose work was once thought to be too sweet and sentimental to be serious, Rodgers and Hammerstein remain fresh because of what their work reveals about those who see and hear it.

The two took their place within what was already a distinctively American art form and transformed it. Through what they did with that form, they became America's songwriters of the century.

Alvin S. Felzenberg writes and lectures about the American presidency.

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