Society: One Hindu's Take on Gay Marriage
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Society

One Hindu's Take on Gay Marriage

Discrimination against homosexuals has no place in our religion, the first to teach that God is equally present in beings of all sexual orientations

By Anantanand Rambachan

In November, Minnesotans will approve or reject a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage. Many belonging to long-established religions in Minnesota have joined the debate over this matter. Jews and Christians, liberal and conservative, have all expressed positions.

Our state is home also to significant numbers of people of other world religions, including my own Hindu tradition. It is important that our voices also be offered in the public square. This amendment threatens to enshrine in law the perspective of particular religions and marginalize others.

There are important teachings in the Hindu tradition that affirm the equal worth of all sexual orientations. In the Hindu tradition, the value of the human person is not located in his or her sexual identity. It proceeds from the teaching that God is present equally and identically in all beings. No being is excluded, and awareness of this truth is regarded as the highest religious wisdom.

In relation to the attainment of life's highest goal, spiritual liberation, the Hindu tradition does not discriminate between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Its sacred scriptures positively mention the accessibility of liberation for gays. What stands in the way of liberation is ignorance of God existing in the heart of all beings, expressing itself in greed, violence and injustice.

One of the most remarkable statements about the inclusivity of God's love in the Hindu tradition occurs in the Ramayana, an ancient Sanskrit epic. The Ramayana tells the life story of Rama, revered by Hindus as an incarnation of God. In speaking about the nature of divine love, Rama mentions gays: "One who worships me in thought, word and action, relinquishing deceit, whether man, gay or woman is supremely dear to me."

There is good evidence that Hindu culture was one of the earliest to recognize that human sexual identity is not just heterosexual. Ancient texts refer to a third gender, different from the traditional male or female. Gender diversity is seen as part of the natural diversity of humanity and inherited at birth.

This ancient appreciation for human sexual diversity, along with the value derived from God's presence in all, must significantly inform our response to gays. Just as heterosexual persons are not called upon to justify their identities, gays should not be burdened with the obligation to explain or defend their own.

Justice, understood as equality of opportunity and treatment, is a consequence of the equal presence of God in all. This teaching is also the source of cardinal values such as noninjury, compassion and generosity. Knowledge of God's presence in all requires reverence and consideration for all beings. Hindus are called upon to identify with others in joy and sorrow, sharing their happiness and suffering.

In the case of homosexuals, it requires that we know something of the pain that comes from being demonized, ostracized and persecuted on account of their sexual identity. Homophobia, characterized as it is by fear, hate and denigration of homosexuals, finds no justification in Hinduism and betrays its most cherished vision and values.

The Hindu understanding of human worth and the diversity of sexual identity have direct implications for our voting choices on the proposed amendment of the Minnesota Constitution. Same-sex relationships should be recognized by the state and afforded the legal benefits and privileges granted to heterosexuals.

The public good, as understood in the Hindu tradition, is best served by our support for committed relationships that embody the values of love, loyalty, trust, care, friendship and justice. Such values are not exclusive to heterosexuals. There is no good religious argument in the Hindu tradition for supporting this amendment to the Minnesota Constitution.

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Anantanand Rambachan, Ph.D, is Chair and Professor of Religion, Philosophy and Asian Studies at Saint Olaf College, Minnesota, USA, where he has been teaching since 1985. Among his books are Accomplishing the Accomplished, The Limits of Scripture, The Advaita Worldview: God, World and Humanity, The Hindu Vision and Gitamrtam: The Essential Teachings of the Bhagavadgita.