



# *Honeymoon in Denmark*

WHAT NORTHERN EUROPE CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE  
REALITY OF LIFE AFTER MARRIAGE EQUALITY.

BY JAMES WITHERS AND MARK LIEBERMANN

# “In every society, the definition of marriage has not ever to my knowledge included homosexuality,”

the Republican U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, Rick Santorum, told the Associated Press in 2003. It was the words that followed, however, that sparked a firestorm of controversy, outrage and not a few jokes on both sides of the marriage-equality divide: “That’s not to pick on homosexuality. It’s not, you know, man on child, man on dog, or whatever the case may be. It is one thing. And when you destroy that, you have a dramatic impact.”

It’s easy (and, perhaps, most appropriate) to simply laugh at the ludicrousness of Santorum’s stance on gay marriage—which amounts to little more than a fourth-grade-level taunt or a twisted perversion of same-sex love as the equivalent of bestiality. And it’s similarly understandable to simply scream at the television every time the Reverend Pat Robertson or one of his fundamentalist ilk declares the impending apocalypse the fault of two gay men who want to marry, have a party and register for new flatware at Barney’s.

But what happens when the notion of stripping gay and lesbian people of not only the right, but the possibility, of (ever) marrying or joining in civil unions, becomes the stuff of mainstream political discourse? During the 2004 presidential debates, President George W. Bush proudly proclaimed that it was time for a Constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage—and many states followed suit with Defense of Marriage Amendments (DOMA) to their own constitutions. But, amid all the shouting and posturing, where is the real, nuanced conversation about the potential societal impact of the granting of full marriage rights to same-sex couples? And for someone genuinely interested in making a case for the fight for marriage equality in this country (as some, not *all*, gay and lesbian people are), how does he arm himself with facts and statistics to counter the dogma?

With Massachusetts same-sex marriages just now in their infancy, it’s perhaps too soon to gauge any real sociological patterns in the aftermath of that state’s 2003 Supreme Court decision that denying same-sex couples the right to marry was unconstitutional. So, without any empirical examples, how do we answer the assertion (not exclusive to right-wing fundamentalists) that allowing gay and lesbian people to marry will fundamentally alter the state of marriage—and that the repercussions will endanger an already fragile institution so fraught with high divorce rates? One pos-

sible answer lies across the pond in Northern Europe, where, more than a decade ago, several nations granted legal marriage rights to GLBT people—and provide more quantitative statistics to consult.

The state of Denmark officially enacted a registered partnership law in 1989, extending all the legal rights of different-sex married couples to registered same-sex couples (though not technically granting the title of “marriage” to the unions). The legislatures of two other Scandinavian countries, Norway and Sweden, soon followed suit—in 1993 and 1994, respectively. (More recently, of course, a number of other nations, including The Netherlands (2001), Belgium (2003), Spain (2005), Britain (2005) and Canada (2005), have adopted even more progressive laws—as in Massachusetts, however, not much data can be gleaned from the effects of these relatively new laws.) In the intervening years since Denmark, Norway and Sweden’s laws went into effect, there have been wildly divergent pronouncements about the effects of these same-sex “marriages” on the “institution of marriage” as a whole. Some

trending heavily towards high divorce rates and the increasing prevalence of cohabitating, unmarried couplings throughout the ’70s and ’80s (before gay and lesbian couples were even close to marrying legally). “There is a cause and effect issue,” says Darren R. Spedale, co-author, with William N. Eskridge, Jr., of *Gay Marriage: For Better or Worse? What We’ve Learned From the Evidence* (being published in May by Oxford University Press). “Kurtz starts his analysis when same-sex marriage laws were passed. There were huge marriage patterns in the 1970s and 1980s and most changes took place before gay marriages.”

But it’s what happened in the wake of those registered-partnership laws that forms the crux of Spedale and Eskridge’s argument—not only were straight marriages not undermined by the legal codification of gay and lesbian unions, but divorce rates and the incidence of non-marital births actually declined (in some cases precipitously). In a chapter titled “Modern Scandinavian Families and the Defense-of-Marriage Argument,” the two writers explain:

“Rather we should expect to see marriage

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American conservatives seized on reports that a decline in heterosexual marriage rates and a spike in out-of-wedlock births could supposedly be tied to the advent of the partnership laws (and the implied loosening of traditional mores that they heralded). Writing in the *Boston Globe* in 2003, Stanley Kurtz, a research fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University and editor at the conservative *National Review Online*, opined:

“Data from European demographers and statistical bureaus show that a majority of children in Sweden and Norway are now born out of wedlock, as are 60 percent of first-born children in Denmark. In socially liberal districts of Norway, where the idea of same-sex registered partnerships is widely accepted, marriage itself has almost entirely disappeared.”

So, end of story, right? Gay people really do ruin marriage. Well, not exactly. Many experts look at that same data out of Scandinavia and see an entirely different scenario—one in which heterosexual marriages in those countries were

rates falling faster, divorce rates accelerating upward, and a surge in non-marital birth rates. The data reveal no such trend. Not only do the registered partnership laws in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden not correlate to supernormal plunges in marriage rates and super-elevated divorce rates but some of the trends move in the other direction.”

But what does all of this talk about Scandinavia have to do with the debate here in the States, where public interest seems to sway more towards Brangelina than “regular” gay and lesbian couples? Ultimately, while their book is centered on the lives and loves of people in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, Spedale and Eskridge hope it can add a calm voice of reason to the yelling and shouting. “There is a slice of the United States that does not buy into the right’s argument, but it, too, still needs to be convinced,” Spedale says. Maybe, just maybe, all they need is for Rick Santorum’s voice to not be the only one in the room. **G**