

## **A faith-based case for marriage equality**

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By **Star-Ledger Guest Columnist**

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In making it clear that he will veto the marriage equality bill now making its way through the state Legislature, Gov. Chris Christie has ensured that the debate over the morality of gay and lesbian relationships will be with us for months to come.

As representatives of faith traditions that struggled for decades with this issue, we know that attitudes about homosexuality do not change easily. Still, it pains us that so many opponents of marriage equality invoke a handful of scriptural texts — open to a variety of interpretations — to deny their fellow citizens equal treatment under civil law.

To be clear, we are well aware that there are verses in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that some scholars and believers are convinced prohibit sexual relations between members of the same gender regardless of the context. But other equally reputable scholars and devout believers argue that these verses refer to particular sorts of exploitative relationships and do not pertain to the subject of same-gender marriage, which was unknown in Biblical times.

These contested verses are dismissed by still other scholars, who point out that the world has long disregarded many seemingly definitive scriptural prohibitions — such as the ones against divorce or taking interest on a loan. It is also true that we no longer condone actions that the Scriptures explicitly endorse, such as stoning a disobedient child.

In the face of disagreement about the meaning of holy texts, many in the Christian tradition have turned for guidance to the example of Jesus, whose movement was open to the most marginalized people in his society, and ask why we should not follow his example.

Many in the Jewish tradition reflect on the principle referred to as *b'tselem elohim* — the understanding articulated in the first chapter of the book of Genesis that all human beings are created in God's image — and come to realize that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people express something of God's nature as surely as heterosexuals do.

Scripture and theology are not the only resources we draw on in supporting marriage equality. We see same-sex couples every day driving their neighborhood car pool, volunteering in schools and youth sports leagues, supporting local businesses and gracing the houses of worship wise enough to welcome them with their talent and their energy. What possible interest can the state have in drawing a distinction between the relationships of these committed couples and those of their heterosexual friends?

Like the religious leaders who oppose marriage equality, we too form our consciences by studying scripture and the lessons that our ancient traditions have taught us. Like them, our opinions flow from our faith. Yet we arrive at different conclusions on the issue of marriage equality, and about the role that religion should play in our current debate.

Thanks to the wisdom of the First Amendment, differing theological notions about the nature of marriage will continue to flourish across our diverse religious landscape. But a state has neither the right nor the competence to promote one of those theological understandings in opposition to others — particularly when doing so deprives some citizens of the rights enjoyed by others.

The governor has said he is “not someone who changes positions with the grace of a ballerina.” Yet at the deepest level, no change is required. He has pledged to perform his duties “impartially and justly.” It is our prayer that the state’s legislators will find the wisdom to act with the same impartiality and justice.

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