

Globalized Religion and Sexual Identity

Contexts, Contestations, Voices

Edited by

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Contexts



The Rise of Anti-Gay Religious Right Activism in the U.S.

A Review of Major Sociological Theories

Rebecca Barrett-Fox

More than theological beliefs, more than organizational strategies, more than denominational ties, more than historical groupings, attitudes toward sexuality—the main issue at play in the contemporary culture wars—define conservative Christianity in the U.S. As Rhys H. Williams notes, “religious conflict in the U.S. has more often been about contested morality than about theological disputes” (Williams 2003, 176). Though theological beliefs matter, agreement among conservative believers about doctrine is not required. Instead, what is required is agreement about social issues, particularly those involving sexuality. Thus, conservative Catholics, Protestants, Mormons, and Jews have become, since the 1970s, co-belligerents guarding a border between the sexually acceptable and the sexually unacceptable. Despite theological variety, their similar and strongly held beliefs on social issues make members of the Religious Right, this loose affiliation of socially conservative believers, significant political actors who have “mint[ed]...family values as the new currency of politics” (Sands 2000, 3). Conceived this way, the Religious Right includes political lobbying groups such as Family Research Council; radio and television networks such as Bott Radio Network or Sky Angel; publishing houses such as Tyndale and news outlets such as One News Now; as well as pastors, congregations, denominations, and church networks. What these diverse individuals and groups have in common is not their theology as much as their concern with public expressions of morality, especially as sexual morality.

Because religion has never held official legal authority over the United States government, American religion, specifically conservative Christianity, has turned its domination to areas of individual behavior, including the most intimate of relationships: between sexual partners. Sexuality, gender, and reproduction—the central issues of “family values”—were particularly vulnerable to being used to agitate the “heart of the American polity itself” (Herman 2000, 152), and appropriating those values has been of strategic political importance. Moreover, the people with the greatest stake in changing the Religious

Right-supported status quo are those with the least power in contemporary culture: people who are easily demonized and marginalized and defeated: women, people living in families outside the celebrated nuclear structure, and gay people. In particular, those advocating what the Religious Right terms a “gay rights agenda” have been the target of Religious Right political activism since the 1970s.

This chapter considers five major sociological explanations offered to explain current religiously-inspired anti-gay activism, with a focus on the context in which such activism arose and how it is maintained. Religiously-inspired anti-gay activism can be seen as: (1) a defense of the declining prestige of conservative religion; (2) an expression of stores of political resources pooling since the early twentieth century; (3) action motivated by genuine concern about particular social causes; (4) the result of corporate populism, so that the Religious Right serves “as a front for the acquisition of political power by special economic interests” (Wechsler 1981, xiv); and finally as (5) a defense “of a culturally coherent life-style and world view” (Harper and Leicht 1984, 104). Providing a review of sociological theories as well as literature that tests them, this chapter seeks to summarize and synthesize major themes in the sociology of religion as they apply to recent trends in the politicization of human sexuality, beginning in 2003, when *Lawrence v. Texas*, which struck down sodomy laws, was decided and onward.

A Status Politics Explanation

In his 1946 *Essays in Sociology*, Max Weber suggested that, along with economic class and political affiliation, people could be categorized into status groups, that is, groups that hold common claims to social prestige (Weber 1946, 180–195). Applying this concept to 1950s America, Seymour M. Lipset and Richard Hofstadter recognized how such groups sought political power through the use of “status politics”: by harnessing the resentment of those who wish to maintain or improve their status, political figures are able to rally support for their causes (Brandmeyer and Denisoff 1969, 5–11). According to Lipset and Earl Raab, this “politics of resentment” is especially profitable for American political leaders, for “the problem of status displacement has been an enduring characteristic of American life” due to the “fluidity” of American society (Lipset and Raab 1970, 24).

For conservative Christians today, public expressions of and toleration for sexual difference represent a threat to the place of conservative Christianity. Symbolic acts, such as a holiday honouring gay rights activist and assassinated

politician Harvey Milk, are interpreted by conservative Christians as an effort on the part of both the government and the broader culture to delegitimize conservative Christianity and replace it with multiculturalism, secularism, and acceptance of sexual difference.¹ In this way, fundamentalist Christians express concern that they are treated like outsiders, a terrible insult to those who understand themselves to be authentic gatekeepers of America's soul. Notes William R. Hutchison in his analysis of pluralism in the 1960s and after, "The unitive or counterpluralist impulse ... remained alive and vigorous in the final decades of the twentieth century not because of extremists ... but because of a larger 'religious right' that was predominantly white and Protestant" (Hutchison 2003, 219). In order to manage their anxiety about this decline in their prestige, fundamentalist Christians have sought political power, hoping to legislate a permanent place for themselves in the American hierarchy of prestige.

The application of status politics theory has not been whole-heartedly accepted as an explanation for the Religious Right by scholars in the field. Kenneth D. Wald, Dennis E. Owen, and Samuel S. Hill, Jr. caution that researchers cannot infer status discontent without "direct questioning on that topic," which many scholars avoid. While "status discontent should be treated as an attitudinal property exhibited in varying degrees by persons at all levels of the social structure," scholars should measure it via "direct questioning on that topic" rather than inferring it (Wald, Owen and Hill 1989, 4–5). In their research, Wald, Owen, and Hill did just this, discovering that feelings that traditional social groups are not appropriately appreciated "does apparently motivate support for contemporary moral reform movements" even more so than economic concerns and sometimes even when these feelings conflict with economic concerns (1989, 11), a finding central to Thomas Frank's claim in *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004) that voters can be activated by appeals to conservative morality even when conservative policies run counter to their own best interests. Wald, Owen, and Hill note that status discontent is "corporate and referential" (1989, 13)—that is, people resent not just their individual lost prestige but also that of whole groups. Indeed, Wald, Owen, and Hill discovered that "[p]eople who felt that society accorded too little respect to groups representing traditional values—churchgoers, ministers, people who worked hard and obeyed the law,

1 See, for example, SaveCalifornia's campaign against state legislation to honour Harvey Milk with a day of recognition ("Urge the Governor to Veto 'Harvey Milk Gay Day' for Schoolchildren," *SaveCalifornia*. March 3, 2014, <https://savecalifornia.com/harvey-milk-day.html>).

people like themselves—were indeed more positively disposed to support the agenda, organizations and activities of the New Christian Right” (2003, 12, italics in original). This comes as no surprise, for if this were not the case, the Religious Right would not so deliberately foster this kind of resentment. For example, the Religious Right was rewarded for its work in 2007 when the Department of Justice, under Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez, launched the First Freedom Project, an initiative to increase prosecution of religious discrimination cases (U.S. Department of Justice 2013), and proposed changes to federal law to recognize same-sex marriages are frequently depicted as an “assault on the very root and source of our claim to decent liberty” (Keyes 2013).

Such thinking circulates broadly in the Religious Right. For example, in May 2007, Tony Perkins of Family Research Council sent an email alert to supporters of this “pro-family” organization (since labeled a “hate group” by the Southern Poverty Law Center),² entitled “Family Values or the Liberal Status Quo?” railing against the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), a “hate crimes” bill that extended coverage of current federal hate crimes legislation to include discrimination based on sexuality but not, in the final version, on gender identity. In his email encouraging readers to work against the bill (which has not become law, despite that fact that, as of November 2013, the majority of voters in every Congressional district supports its passage (Williams Institute, 2013)), Perkins appealed to his supporters’ fear that their traditional values were under attack and claimed, in fact, that they themselves were not receiving due respect under the law. Wrote Perkins:

This bill creates a caste system within American society where those who fit a certain category—ranging from race, disability, gender to sexual orientation and transgendered would be seen as deserving special legal protection. The bill is most notable for the millions of Americans it leaves out, meaning if **you or I** are a victim of a violent crime—we matter less.

Perkins is creating an “us/them” dichotomy and asking his readers to identify as a person being devalued and even deprived of protection under the law. His purpose is specifically to derail efforts to extend protection to queer people, as his other emails on the topic reveal.³ In this mailing, his commitment to the

2 Southern Poverty Law Center, “Groups: Family Research Council,” *Intelligence Files*, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/family-research-council>.

3 Tony Perkin’s *Washington Updates* include, in nearly every update, a short article on current events in public discussions about sexuality as well as actions that FRC supporters can take

rhetorical strategy of making readers feel belittled and undervalued is so strong that he fails to see that the division he creates is not straight versus homosexual. Instead, his email actually places white, nondisabled, straight men into one category and everyone else into the “other” category. While Perkin’s intention is probably not to suggest that women, people with disabilities, and racial minorities do not deserve to be protected against discrimination, this is what his email says.⁴ Notably, he did not retract this statement. It is included here as one example of how readily appeals to status discontent are made. When the object of resentment is constructed as a wealthy, childless, selfish gay man whose life goal is to optimize sexual pleasure, despite the public costs of doing so, or lesbians who selfishly reject their proper roles as wives and mothers in pursuit of pleasure, the resentment is even easier to muster (Hardisty 2000, 97–125).

A Political Resources Explanation

Resource mobilization theory holds that a group moves when it has the resources to do so. Stephen D. Johnson and Joseph B. Tamney suggest that the Religious Right gained power in the public sphere in 1980s because it had acquired the knowledge, abilities, and resources that it lacked previously (Johnson and Tamney 1985, 987–994). Additionally, this was a time of demographic growth in the politically and religiously conservative U.S. South and decline in traditionally liberal areas of the population (Hill 1985, 139–154). The rise of the electronic church—that is, televangelists and radio stations and television networks devoted to Christian programming—was an expression of the expertise and financial resources of religious people. Though H.L. Mencken had described early fundamentalist believers as poor and uneducated, by the 1980s, the socioeconomic status of many religious conservatives had increased, and this rise contributed to the creation of Christian markets that in turn fueled greater wealth for at least some of the faithful: Christian book retailers, tourist agencies, retreat centres, and clothing lines are just a few examples.

to undermine gay rights advancements. They can be found at <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?it=wu>. Family Research Council has archived its collected writings on homosexuality at <http://www.frc.org/homosexuality>.

- 4 To credit Tony Perkins with a commitment to the protection of racial minorities, women, and people with disabilities is generous. Perkins’ disparaging comments about the Equal Rights Amendment do not suggest that he seeks a legislative solution to discrimination against women.

In the 1980s, direct mailing campaigns were innovations that allowed for the mass mobilization of conservative believers, and today the internet functions in a similar fashion to dispense information, rally voters, and connect believers. At the same time, old-fashioned human-to-human contact has been revitalized by church structures, particularly useful to megachurches but also used by smaller congregations, that divide attendees into small groups or house churches for studies of parachurch materials and Bible passages as well as service projects. From the perspective of the faithful, the church—that is, the body of believers—is a source of power, not so much supernatural as political, for it can quickly be mobilized for pickets, protests, letting-writing campaigns, and voter drives.

During the last quarter of the twentieth-century and the first years of the twenty-first century, the public square may have become more hospitable to religion, particularly at the state level, as Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke write in the introduction of *Representing God at the State House: Religion and Politics in the American States*, a series of case studies of religious activism in state legislatures. Several factors created a more inviting environment: increased state budgets; a shift of power away from the federal government and toward state governments, especially over welfare policy; the availability of lobbyists; a willingness of the larger political sphere to tolerate religious activism, in part due to the success of religious activists in the Civil Rights Movement; and the fact that controversial policy decisions such as those about abortion and same-sex marriage are made at the state level (Cleary and Hertzke 2006, vii-viii). In this atmosphere, the increasing political resources of the Religious Right could be exercised with less opposition than conservative religious and political believers may have previously faced. Additionally, at the state level, the party control of a state government, the level of professionalization of its legislature (which correlates to the level of access that lobbyists have to legislators), and the overall political culture of a state government—whether it sees the state government as a moralizing force, a force that interferes with individual autonomy, or something else—all contribute to the reception that politically-active believers will receive at the state house (Cleary and Hertzke 2006, 229–231). Finally, in the battle against gay rights, the opponents lacked the political mobilization resources that the Religious Right were deploying.⁵

5 For example, Lambda Legal, a nonprofit legal defense organization serving gays and lesbians, fought to come into existence for nearly twenty years before, in 1973, it was granted legal status as a nonprofit. Even then, though, according to Lambda Legal, achieving courtroom and legislative success “was an uphill battle” (“About Us: History,” *Lambda Legal*. accessed May 20, 2013, <http://www.lambdalegal.org/about-us/history.html>).

Anti-gay rights groups had, from the 1970s through the 1990s, significantly better resources than the poorly-organized, poorly-funded gay rights advocates against whom they campaigned. For example, in 1977, in Dade County, Florida, gay rights activists won a few small victories to protect gay rights. However, minor country star and Florida orange juice spokesperson Anita Bryant formed Save Our Children, a campaign to roll back those gay rights advances. Deploying homophobic stereotypes of gay people, especially men, as sexual predators, Save Our Children was able to quickly persuade county commissioners to reverse the gains. In response, gay rights groups learned that they would have to be much more organized, politically savvy, and better funded in order to fight the many local battles that were breaking out over gay rights.⁶

Though their religious critics may complain that such groups in winning political power lost their prophetic voices,⁷ Religious Right groups continue to engage David versus Goliath imagery, depicting religious conservatives as populist outsiders fighting against well-financed, politically-connected Washington insiders bought by the gay rights lobby (Dobson 1998) For example, the cover of *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win this Fight*, by Focus on the Family founder James Dobson (2004) includes an image of clearly gendered wedding rings (hers, smaller and finer and with a diamond, his, with a wider, unadorned band) in the cross hairs of a gun's scope.

An Issue-Based Explanation of Religious Right Activity

By calling themselves “Values Voters,” members of the Religious Right frame their commitment to particular “values,” better understood as political positions, which have proven effective through use of “values language” and terms such as “family” and “life” at garnering support for particular political causes such as anti-gay rights legislation or anti-abortion laws. In particular, concerns about moral issues drive support for the Religious Right. In an analysis of local support for the Moral Majority, Clyde Wilcox, Ted G. Jelen, and Sharon Linzey conclude that “[t]he single strongest predictor of support... was a set of

6 Eric Marcus details the events around Save Our Children's campaign in *Making Gay History: The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights*. (New York: Harper, 2002). In this collection, more than sixty gay Americans recall the gay rights movement in the U.S., many of them noting the importance of Bryant's campaign.

7 See, for example, the debate between Timothy Dalrymple, Jim Daly, and Elodie Ballantine Emig in “If the Supreme Court Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage, What Next?,” *Christianity Today*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/april/next-marriage-trend.html>.

conservative positions on social issues” (Wilcox, Jelen and Linzey 1995, 271). More specifically, their pro-family ideology is explicitly anti-gay, including anti-gay family.⁸ Members of the Religious Right are careful to couch their policy goals as *pro-family*, defining their enemies, in contrast, as *anti-family*, feeding into the stereotype of gay people as too self-centred to embed themselves in a family setting and denying that gay people may desire or actually already have families of their own, a claim challenged directly in court after court (Eskridge 2013) as well as in public relations campaigns for marriage equality, such as the Human Rights Campaign’s Americans for Marriage Equality effort.

Gay marriage and gay families have been especially salient for members of the Religious Right. Research by James Stoutenborough, Donald P. Haider-Markel, and Mahally D. Allen on the influence of U.S. Supreme Court gay rights cases on public opinion suggests that “the policy implications of a decision are likely to play an important role in determining whether or not the decision influences public opinion” (Stoutenborough, Haider-Markel and Allen 2006, 430)—that is, when Americans anticipate that a new law or court ruling will affect their lives, they are more likely to pay attention to its development and, if they dislike the anticipated result, protest it or work against its implementation. Additionally, according to Stoutenborough, Haider-Markel, and Allen, to have the most effect, the cases need to have “significant national implications” and be “widely covered” in the national media (2006, 430). The more members of the Religious Right hear about potentially dangerous consequences of a gay rights law (such as stories saying that pastors will be denied their right to refuse to marry a same-sex couple),⁹ the more they are likely to have negative feelings about the law—including laws that have repealed the ban on gay people serving openly in the military or have sought to legalize same-sex marriage (Stoutenborough, Haider-Markel and Allen 2006, 430).

8 Members of the Religious Right have, for example, made effective use of Mark Regnerus’ much-criticized study that suggested that children of gay parents fared worse than children of married straight couples. “How Different are the Adult Children of Parents who have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study,” *Social Science Research* 41(4) (2012): 752–770.

9 In response to such fears, California State Senator Mark Leno proposed, in that state, a bill to protect the non-profit status of churches when their leaders refuse to perform same-sex ceremonies. This protection is already part of the law, but Leno, a Democrat representing San Francisco, argues that the legislation “makes it perfectly clear that churches and clergy members have solid protection under state law.” (“Leno Legislation Reaffirming Religious Freedom Passes Assembly,” *Mark Leno*, August 28, 2012, <http://sdl1.senate.ca.gov/news/2012-08-28-leno-legislation-reaffirming-religious-freedom-passes-assembly>).

Such concern about specific issues drives voting habits of the Religious Right. Among moralist Republicans, those whose concern about moral issues determines their support for a candidate, is a strong tendency to evaluate a leader based upon his or her adherence to positions on specific issues rather than his or her overall leadership qualities (Fabrizio, McLaughlin and Associates 2007). The rise of the Religious Right, in fact, corresponds to the emergence in the 1970s of feminism and the gay rights movement, and the Religious Right itself defines its mission as a response to these “threats” and works specifically against the issues for which these other movements work. An issues-based explanation of the Religious Right notes that the relationship between the rise of the Religious Right and the prevalence of the “sins” (or, in more recent Religious Right literature, “social ills”) against which it fights—abortion, gay rights, no-fault divorce—is not merely correlated but causal. This viewpoint recognizes that the Religious Right may be, in fact, a reasonable response to the cultural changes of the 1970s through the present (Wilcox, Jelen and Linzey 1995).

A Cultural Populism Explanation of Religious Right Activity

Much has been made of the relationship between the Republican Party and religious conservatives. While religious conservatives are likely to be Republicans,¹⁰ they are not without criticism of the party. Some of the difficulty between the Republican Party and the Religious Right may, in fact, be over the issue of conservatism. For many religious believers, the Republican Party is not conservative or religious enough. According to data presented by the firm Fabrizio, McLoughlin, and Associates, the percent of Republicans

10 A 2012 poll by *The Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that twenty-one percent of Republicans are “Republican Values Voters.” (Peyton Craighill, “The Many Faces of the Republican Party,” *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2012/08/20/the-many-faces-of-the-republican-party/>.) Similarly, Fabrizio, McLoughlin, and Associates reported that, in 1997, roughly one-fifth of Republicans fell into this category, while, in 2007, nearly one-fourth did (“The Elephant,” 21). The so-called “God gap” between the parties has, according to The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press been widening over the last twenty-five years, with “values” as a bigger difference between registered Republicans and Democrats than age, race, or class (“Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years: Trends in American Values: 1987–2012,” *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, June 4, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/partisan-polarization-surges-in-bush-obama-years/>).

self-identifying as Protestant has decreased (2007, 14), while the percent identifying themselves as “moralists” (that is, those with a “[l]aser-like focus on moral issues”) has increased (2007, 28). Moralist Republicans are more likely than non-moralists to agree that an employer should be able to terminate an employee based solely on his or her sexual orientation (Fabrizio, McLaughlin and Associates 2007, 47), to hold that gays and lesbians should not serve openly in the military, and to agree with the statement “Public policy should not contradict God’s Law” (Fabrizio, McLaughlin and Associates 2007, 59). In fact, seventy-six percent of moralists agreed with this claim while only about forty-five percent of other Republicans held this view. This gap between the religiously and politically conservative members of the Republican Party and members who do not identify as moralists contributes to internal strife, as evidenced by the fact that a majority of Republicans *except* moralists agreed with the statement “The Republican Party has spent too much time focusing on moral issues such as ... gay marriage and should instead be spending time focusing on economic issues such as taxes and government spending” (Fabrizio, McLaughlin and Associates 2007, 36). This suggests a strong division within the party, manifested in the 2010 mid-term elections with the campaigns and elections of Tea Party members and again after the 2012 defeat of Mitt Romney, who was viewed as simply too socially moderate by many Republicans. And it was the driving force behind the significant anger expressed by conservative Republicans at the party’s post-election analysis, *Growth and Opportunity Project*, which suggested that Republicans be less vocally anti-gay in order to capture younger votes (Barbour et al 2013), and backlash to the national party’s support for “two activist homosexual candidates,” Carl Demaio and Richard Tisei (Perkins 2013a). Despite the national party’s calls for moderation, Religious Right leaders have ominously suggested a third party (Perkins 2013b). They adamantly maintain religiously-inspired political views even in the face of opposition from other Republicans, refusing to abandon or modify ideological positions that alienate moderate voters, which makes for difficulties if they do achieve office. As Rhys Williams notes, “[A]ctors who have framed their claims as moral imperatives cannot easily ‘ratchet down’ their demands to accept less on the grounds that it is a necessary compromise” (Williams 2003, 186).

Though the Religious Right is not merely an arm of the Republican Party, the emergence of the Religious Right and a national swing toward political conservatism since the 1970s may still be related. The religious tone of Republican rhetoric has found resonance in the Religious Right—and vice versa. Such resonance happens “when particular claims align with the previous experiences, narratives, or cultural worldviews of the people who hear

the claim” (Williams 2003, 183). In other words, the Religious Right may have simply found the Republican Party to be a fellow traveler—and if the broader world is receptive to the claims of the Religious Right and the Republican Party, so much the better, for “it is not simply the proportion of Christian conservative voters that explains political potency; it is a legislator’s perception that Christian conservatism is broadly palatable to the voting public as a whole” (den Dulk and Hertzke 2006, 236).

Though some Republicans do not adopt an anti-gay rights stance—two prominent exceptions being Log Cabin Republicans and GOProud, national organizations for gay and lesbian conservatives—the party, as represented on the national level, has consistently supported anti-gay rights measures (Soule 2004, 453–477) including the effort to mandate enforcement of the Defense of Marriage Act (Sonmez and Pershing 2011). Many commentators have suggested that the Religious Right responded to fear about the potential legalization of gay marriage in order to enact state constitutional amendments defining marriage as between one man and one woman, despite both the legal redundancy (as many states already had laws defining marriage this way) and the legal impotence of such amendments should the U.S. Supreme Court recognize same-sex marriage (Adam 2003, 259–276). Thus, suggest some analysts, leaders in the Religious Right fostered anxiety about a perceived loss—the legalization of gay marriage—in order to secure a legal and electoral victory.¹¹ Furthermore, by making the issue of gay marriage into a spectacle, conservative Republican lawmakers kept attention away from other issues of national concern.¹² Opposition to gay rights, a position pushed by Religious Right members, is thus linked to other conservative Republican concerns, including voter turn-out.

11 PBS, “Republicans and Religion,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, October 27, 2006, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1009/cover.html>. Daniel A. Smith, Matthew K. DeSantis, and Jason Kessel tested this thesis in Ohio and Michigan and found that conservative Christians overwhelmingly voted for both same-sex marriage bans and President Bush, though they did not conclude that same-sex marriage bans inspired voting among Christian conservatives who would not have otherwise voted (“Same-Sex Marriage Ballot Measures and the 2004 Presidential Election,” *State and Local Government Review* 38, no. 2 (2006): 78–91).

12 The belief of the Religious Right is that “we can assure ourselves that so long as Americans live by an appropriate sexual code, we need not worry about American moral health in other areas”—specifically those that might lead to liberal social and international policies (Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003): 10).

A Worldview Defense Explanation

“The Christian worldview” is a term often-used in Religious Right discourse, particularly as a way of proving the authenticity of consumer goods, especially educational materials, sold in the Christian marketplace. For example, the American Family Association and Bott Radio Network sponsor Worldview Weekend, a traveling conference with associated books, Bible studies, and online courses. Participants can begin by taking a test to see if they currently have a “Biblical worldview”—that is, their worldviews score a “strong Biblical,” “moderate Biblical,” “secular humanist,” “socialist worldview,” or “communist/Marxist/socialist/humanist worldview” (Worldview Weekend 2003). Such mixing of political, religious, and economic labels suggests that those writing the test see conservative Christianity as exclusive of forms of government other than democracy and economic systems other than capitalism.

Such exclusivity in defining what qualifies as a Christian worldview (a phenomenon that is mirrored in Fabrizio, McLaughlin, and Associates’ determination that moralists within the Republican Party select candidates based on how closely those candidates’ views on specific issues match their own) contributes to the feeling of being chronically threatened by the broader culture. The more inflexible the standards and the less diversity in opinion permissible, the greater the tension between the rigid, righteous religious and the rest of society, including many liberal believers. Thus, as the Christian (or Biblical) worldview—a term that links particular stances on specific issues, such as homosexuality, with selected scriptural passages—is consolidated, it is set in contrast to the mainstream culture. Those who hold this worldview, Nancy T. Ammerman says, “are no more willing to recognize multiple moral authorities in the various institutions in which they live than they are to recognize multiple moral authorities in the various cultures that occupy our diverse world. Theirs is a rhetoric of purity and totality as well as a rhetoric of certainty” (1991, 150)¹³ one that both denies distinctions between the secular and spiritual world by claiming God’s authority over it all and depicts itself as in conflict with the secular world. Indeed, James Davison Hunter posits that conservative believers are part of a community that “derives its identity principally

13 In a “Christian worldview,” scripture alone is credited as the final arbiter of truth. For example, Creation Ministries, a creationist organization, includes this statement as one of its tenets: “By definition, no apparent, perceived or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the Scriptural record” (“About Us,” *Creation Ministries*. accessed May 3, 2013, http://creation.com/about-us#what_we_believe).

from a posture of resistance to the modern world order" (Hunter 1990, 56) even if its resistance is highly selective, with contemporary churches making effective use of, for example, modern technology and mass media. The cultural framework in which such a mindset developed, observe Charles L. Harper and Kevin Leicht, is "cultural Fundamentalism in a uniquely American sense" (1984, 105). They add, "It is a world view deriving from historic American Protestantism emphasizing individualism, hard work, thrift, and impulse control. It stands in stark contrast to what is perceived as the pervasive hedonism, moral relativism, and self-fulfillment ethic in American society" (Harper and Leicht 1984, 105)—characteristics used to stereotype gay men and women in Religious Right literature.¹⁴ A tension between these two mythic worldviews serves to motivate Religious Right activity. As Ammerman notes, this description of the world "is a powerful mythic image of a pristine state from which we have fallen and to which we must return, a movement of history that demands the heroic participation of the faithful" (Ammerman 1991, 153). The declared need to protect mythic America from perceived evils is a call to arms.

To call the worldviews "mythic" is, of course, not to dismiss the reality of difference between those with a secular orientation and those with a sacred orientation. While American culture has always muddled the distinction between these two categories, with evangelicals perhaps especially vulnerable in efforts to reconcile the "heart" and the "head" (Worthen 2013), Americans in the 1970s to the present may have real reason to wonder if secular culture has much of value to offer. Harper and Leicht suggest that the rise of the Religious Right may have been mobilized by the fact that "the liberal welfare state policies which have dominated American politics since the depression are widely perceived to have failed, not only by cultural fundamentalists" but by many in the religious mainstream as well as secularists (1984, 105). Mainstream churches did not seem to offer an alternative to secular culture, for such churches are "comfortable in society, having made their peace with the secular world"—that is, they do not have the tense relationship with secularism that marks conservative faith (Shupe 1981, 6). While conservative churches adopted some of the same technologies as secular culture (Brasher 2001), the adoption of current pop culture in the church avoids out-right degradation of women, encourages responsibility, and celebrates citizenship. Such believers, though they "paint the world in black and white" also "do not manufacture the evil they see; they merely name it, highlight

14 For example, in the brochure "Comparing the Lifestyles of Homosexual Couples to Married Couples," Timothy J. Dailey of Family Research Council depicts gay men, in particular, as promiscuous (Washington, D.C.: Family Research Council, no date). The text is available at <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=1504Co2>.

it, caricature it. Theirs is a keen reading of the actual threatening forces present in their society” (Ammerman 1991, 155) or, rather, those forces they perceive as threatening. In the fallout of postmodernism, conservative churches found that they had a message that had appeal, one worth defending.

Social historians may note that the anomie associated with postmodernism was present in American culture long before the emergence of the Religious Right. The mythologizing of the current moment as the most important battle in the War on Christianity erases other, far more tumultuous moments in our national history,¹⁵ but those battles are retold as stories of heroes and hope. Today’s world, though, lacks heroes and has little hope. Writes conservative Christian blogger Vic Bilson:

It is important to recognize that those who are working for the dissolution of our society have a spiritual agenda. They are not merely attempting to dismantle the historic cultural values of this nation and move us toward a homogenized world. They also want to destroy Christianity and Bible-based religion. It is a clear part of their agenda, and they have already moved a long way in that direction.

BILSON, *War on Christianity*

Indeed, Bilson’s writings are devoted to reveal evidence of America’s falling into a spiritual degradation. He calls his site “Jeremiah Project” because, seeing the moral collapse of America, he feels compelled to respond as the prophet Jeremiah did in his own time. While adopting the language of a Hebrew prophet may seem dramatic, such a choice captures the sense of urgency many conservative believers feel when they sense the threat of an increasingly invasive secular mainstream that tolerates the expression of same-sex desire that would, in other times, have been unthinkable.

Multiple Sources, One Goal: Defending Morality

“Even when fundamentalism is struggling and virtually invisible,” as in the middle years of the twentieth century, “it still nurtures its critique of culture,

15 For example, Robert P. Dugan, Jr. of the National Association of Evangelicals titled his book on the topic *Winning the New Civil War: Recapturing America’s Values* (Sisters, OR.: Multnomah, 1991). This comparison between the horrific, divisive Civil War, a war about the enslavement of human people, and today’s cultural battles is historically insensitive, but it is commonly invoked by so-called “culture warriors.”

sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly. A variety of circumstances may conspire, however, to take this vision outside the confines of the families and congregations where it lies dormant," reminds Ammerman (1991, 163). Possibly, each of the above theories provides some insight into why, after decades of apparent silence on the national political scene, conservative believers became involved in the Religious Right in the late 1980s and the movement has continued. After all, the Religious Right is a broad category, encompassing a wide variety of people who join for different reasons, in different places, and at different points in their lives. Increasingly, conservative Christians, once stereotyped as backwoods, poor, rural, and white, are differentiating in wealth, status, and even ethnicity, with many Hispanics, Catholics as well as Protestants, joining the conservative Christian movement (Kelly and Kelly 2005, 93). Though status politics have often been used as an explanatory model, "status politics was not the only factor predisposing individuals to promote the [New Christian Right]," Wald, Owen, and Hill found in their research (1989, 11). They also found evidence of "a high probability of mobilization among persons accessible to issue-entrepreneurs through church-based networks" and support for the claim that cultural factors such as whether people were raised in families and communities where traditionalism was valued, contributed to their support of the Religious Right (Wald, Owen and Hill 1989, 11–12).

On the other hand, Robert Wuthnow suggests that increased activity among conservative believers was "simply... a sensible thing to do" in light of the "recreation of symbolic worlds" that occurred in the 1970s, positing that the election of Jimmy Carter after the Watergate scandal renegotiated the borders between public and private morality and between religion and politics in a way that permitted conservative Christians to partake of politics (Wuthnow 1983, 184). While Wuthnow's thesis still seems applicable, especially given that many issues of concern for the Religious Right are moral or are reframed as moral issues, it does not require the rejection of other theses. The declining prestige given to those who embrace traditional values, people who, in turn, felt their worldview to be under attack, may have converged with an abundance of resources that could be used to respond aggressively to the secular culture. Ammerman argues that conservative religious activism "arises in both response to the movement's own resources and connections and to the demands and structures of the world outside. Its forms and strategies are shaped both by the group's ideology and by the particular political traditions and structures within which it works" (Ammerman 1991, 15). Those strategies may have been fueled and even funded, at times, by secular conservative forces, but it has not always easily fulfilled the desires of those forces. Notably, while sociologists have recognized each of these theories as possible explanations, and a few, like Harper,

recognize multiple factors in motion at once, such as when Wuthnow and Matthew P. Larson note that “any phenomenon as important as fundamentalism does indeed derive from multiple sources” (1991, 22), most analyses ignore the explanations that the Religious Right itself recognizes as diminishing the historical tension between faith and politics. As Gaines M. Foster observes in his analysis of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction America, conservative Christians define “morality primarily in terms of righteousness or virtue, not justice” (2004, 2). Concern for morality, especially sexual morality, then, is the motivation that members of the Religious Right identify for their activism.

Shifts in Religious Right Anti-Gay Rhetoric

Arguments that rest upon the immorality of same-sex intercourse resonate less and less with an American public that shows more comfort than ever with gay people.¹⁶ In part, this growing acceptance of same-sex sexuality may be due to the strategic choice of gay rights activists to repress “the sex in homosexuality in an effort to keep a kind of public/private distinction intact and thereby appeal to a broader liberal public,” for, “if sex stayed in the bedroom and was not part of the public identity of homosexuals, then liberals were more likely to support [a]... reversal in attitude” about homosexuality (Wickberg 2007, 48). In some ways, this strategy evolves from the homophobic demand that “it’s okay if people are gay as long as they act straight in public.” In other words, as gay people’s sexuality is muted, it is less offensive to a heterosexist public, which will, in turn, have fewer reasons to object to gay

16 For example, as of July 2013, the majority of Americans now support the nationwide legal recognition of same-sex marriage, with the only demographics who do not support such a law being men, Southerners, those 55 and older, Protestants, Republicans, conservatives, and those who attend church weekly, as Lydia Saad reported from Gallup. In contrast to the majority of Americans who support gay rights, Religious Right leaders still use negative language about gay people and gay rights, often using secular culture’s increasing tolerance of homosexuality as evidence of the need to reform it. See, for example Cynthia A. Burack, “Getting What ‘We’ Deserve: Terrorism, Sexuality, and the Christian Right” (paper, American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, August 28, 2002 (accessed at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p65079_index.html: 13)). Amy M. Burdette, Christopher G. Ellison, and Terrance D. Hill have noted that “even when negative feelings toward homosexuality are taken into account, conservative Protestant groups are indeed less willing [than other groups] to grant basic civil liberties,” a trend consistent not just among leaders but among lay people (“Conservative Protestantism and Tolerance Toward Homosexuals: An Examination of Potential Mechanisms,” *Sociological Inquiry* 75, no. 2 (2005): 192).

people. This strategy has been effective at derailing Religious Right efforts to depict gay men and women as pathological or individually dangerous and has been a key strategy in the movement for same-sex marriage.

Additionally, the American public beyond the Religious Right is not always enthusiastic about enforcing rules that seem to apply to merely the moral dimension of life. “The direct appeal to religion,” note Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “is... remarkable because the government does not fall back on religion as its primary rationale except when it comes to sex” (2003, 4). In an effort to broaden their argument against homosexuality, its opponents do not cite Bible verses but instead cite social science (or pseudo-social science). Family Research Council, for example, highlights a paper titled “The Negative Health Effects of Homosexuality” by Timothy J. Dailey. Dailey (2003) has also written *Dark Obsession: The Tragedy and Threat of the Homosexual Lifestyle*, indicating his understanding of same-sex attraction as both a personal flaw and a community threat, and books in which he identifies contemporary fulfillments of Biblical prophecy. In promoting “The Negative Health Effects of Homosexuality,” though, Family Research Council treats the paper as if it were objective scientific research, not the work of someone committed to framing same-sex desire as a “tragedy” and “threat.” The effort to make sexuality a crime against science and public health rather than against God is key to moving the discussion from merely a religious debate to one that can appeal to a heteronormative, secular public. In this effort, Family Research Institute has been a publishing leader. Formed in 1982, FRI has, in its own words, “one overriding mission: to generate empirical research on issues that threaten the traditional family, particularly homosexuality, AIDS, sexual social policy, and drug abuse” (Family Research Institute 2003). Recognizing the validating power of science and the academic world, FRI claims to be “the *first* traditionally-minded organization to conduct scientific research in these areas and to publish it in peer-reviewed professional journals” that can be found “in almost all university and medical libraries around the globe” (Family Research Institute 2003). Efforts to give scientific credibility to anti-gay legislation are a recognition that many Americans are wary of purely religious reasoning for law.¹⁷ Conservative Protestants who seek a scientific argument against homosexuality seem to have recognized this.

17 Such unease may be a reason why few members of the judiciary are drawn from fundamentalist and evangelical law schools. Instead, conservative Protestants have found champions for their legal causes in conservative Catholics on the Supreme Court and have supported the appointments of Justices Alito, Scalia, and Thomas and Chief Justice John Roberts—all Catholics whose judicial decisions have aligned with the agenda of the Religious Right. Notably, Justice Kennedy, also Catholic, supported the pro-choice position in *Planned*

In an effort to appear more positive to those audiences that may not espouse religious opposition to homosexuality, the Religious Right has carefully shifted its language to suggest a less explicitly *religious* anti-gay argument. As Kevin R. den Dulk and Allen D. Hertzke note:

[T]he term “Christian” defines the movement in distinctly religious terms. While it is certainly the case that this political movement is fueled largely by highly committed Christians and especially traditionalist evangelicals, there are many within the movement... who would prefer “pro-family” or some other term to focus attention on their policy goals rather than their religious motivations.

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The rhetorical move from explicitly religious language expands the potential base of support for religious anti-gay activism by allowing those who hold anti-gay sentiments to express them without having to accept religious language that they may find unfamiliar, alienating, or inappropriate for public discussion. In some forms, this language may be rooted in “family values,” for “by giving ‘values’ the appellation ‘family,’ it is possible to invoke ‘religion’ without having to name it as such” (Jakobsen 2000, 105), or it may reference sociology and social harm, or it may rely on a rhetoric of choice, of rights, or of compassion.

When homosexuality is framed as a choice (either the choice to *feel* gay or the choice to *act* gay—that is, to experience same-sex attraction or to have same-sex intercourse) unlike something that is viewed as an immutable difference such as, say, race, the chooser is forced to take responsibility for his or her choice. This rhetorical strategy “effectively neutralizes both queer claims of discrimination”—for one can always *choose* to be outside of the group experiencing discrimination—“and public support for legal remedies” that would be appropriate if discrimination was experienced (Burack 2008, 74). By stressing “choice,” the Religious Right actually adopts a social constructionist position; no longer is the anti-gay argument about what is “natural” or “unnatural” but what is the best “choice” an individual can make—and how a society can limit those choices through, among other means, law.¹⁸

Parenthood v. Casey in 1992, and Justice Sotomayor, a Catholic, was criticized by conservative Christians for her suspected pro-choice position during her nomination process in 2009.

18 Indeed, the autobiography of John Paulk, former chair of the North American Exodus International and head of Focus on the Family’s Homosexuality and Gender Division, is titled *Not Afraid to Change: The Remarkable Story of How One Man Overcame Homosexuality* (Tony Marco, co-author (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress, 1998)).

Indeed, not only do gay people have a *choice* to make about their sexuality in this framework, Religious Right rhetoric may demand that they have a right to do so—in other words, a *gay right* to choose not to be gay. The National Association for the Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), for example, is often lauded by the Religious Right for its insistence, for people “struggling with” unwanted same-sex attraction, that “[t]he right to seek therapy to change one’s sexual adaptation should be considered self-evident and inalienable.”¹⁹ American Evangelical Protestantism, with its focus on “making a decision for Christ” seems particularly receptive to this argument because it asks the believer to take responsibility for his or her salvation—and his or her sins, and the language of NARTH (“self-evident and inalienable”) hearkens to the language of the Declaration of Independence, a document revered by the Religious Right.

The Religious Right relies on the language of rights in another way: to articulate gay rights as in tension with religious rights, rights that advocates of gay rights violate or threaten and rights that should take primacy over gay rights (Sears and Osten 2003). Believers must counter, then, with calls for voter referenda and constitutional amendments “protecting” their own heteronormative families and their right to believe that homosexuality is wrong (Daily 2006). Such arguments may appear alarmist or like a false dilemma to outsiders—as they do to Kathleen M. Sands, who asks, “Why are religious freedom and sexual freedom constructed as if they belong to different camps, as if the ground gained by one were always lost by the other?” (2000, 5). Nevertheless, they tap into Religious Right fears that believers are victimized or marginalized.

Finally, the Religious Right utilizes a language of compassion to justify its discouragement of homosexuality and gay rights. For example, conferences promoting “ex-gay” therapy, once promoted by Focus on the Family, then organized by the now-defunct Exodus International, were called “Love Won Out,” as is the collaborative memoir of Exodus International’s former North American chair John Paulk (who exited leadership in conversion ministries after being sighted at a gay bar in 2003) and his wife Anne Paulk.²⁰ Reflects

19 “NARTH Position Statements,” NARTH, accessed February 27, 2008, <http://www.narth.com/menus/positionstatements.html>. Notably, NARTH also recognizes that a person may choose to adopt a gay identity. Religious Right groups never cite this tenet of the NARTH mission statement.

20 Exodus International North America withdrew from the global organization in May 2013, though local affiliates are still free to carry on its mission, albeit without the Exodus International name. Some have reorganized as a network called Restore Hope. In announcing the end of Exodus International’s “season of ministry,” leader Alan Chambers expressed remorse, saying “I am sorry for the pain and hurt many of you have

Cynthia Burack, “[M]any conservative Christians may understand both their feelings of sexual disgust and their willingness to extend compassion to those who inspire it as divine mandates on the issue of same-sex sexuality as well as personal virtues” (Burack 2008, 97). As Anita Bryant said of the early Save Our Children victories, “My stand was not taken out of homophobia, but of love for them [gay people]” (Kelly 1978). Indeed, Bryant congratulates herself on her willingness to not only do God’s work but, in her framework, to do it so compassionately. Contemporary anti-gay crusaders make the same claim.

In the process of shifting from explicitly religious rhetoric to emphasizing social science, choice, rights, and compassion, members of the Religious Right not only appear more tolerant to those outside their group who nevertheless share anti-gay political goals, they also assure themselves that they are caring for the nation, participating in democracy, and encouraging compassion for what they perceive as the suffering and struggling of queer folks. They can thus achieve their own political goals, even when those goals discount others, while assuring themselves of their fidelity to their religion and their nation and their love for their neighbours—even those victimized by their politics.

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experienced,” and renouncing conversion therapy, as Melissa Steffan reported in *Christianity Today* on June 21, 2013. Commentators have been rightly skeptical of his apology, calling for him to actively work against anti-gay efforts among Christians through his new organization (first called Reduce Fear, now branded as Speak.Love.), which has not yet emerged with a clear mission but whose name, some gay rights activists fear, may simply be another effort for anti-gay Christians to cover their activism in the appearance of compassion. See, for example, John Shore’s June 20, 2013 blog post at *Patheos*, “An Open Letter to Exodus International’s Super-Remorseful Alan Chambers,” available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/johnshore/2013/06/who-would-suggest-that-exodus-internationals-apology-isnt-sincere/>.

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