

Religiosity Versus Homosexuality In America (& Elsewhere)

The Evergreen State College: Symposium – “Community Psychology Versus” (2007)

☞ Monograph first published by the *American Humanist Association*

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Nearly forty-five years after federal civil rights legislation was passed, the idea of treating people equally under the law is hardly controversial. However, sexual-oriented minorities have faced constant opposition from government officials and the people who elect and support them. Gays and Lesbians have been, and continue to be, legislated against and demonized. One may wonder why the United States lags so far behind other liberal western democracies when it comes to protecting its citizens. The answer is no doubt complicated, but we can assert with relative certainty that our beliefs about the world have a major influence. In the United States these beliefs often take the form of religious conviction. Religious opposition to homosexuality has held hostage most attempts to pass legislation for the equal protection of lesbian and gay men. Judea-Christian tradition holds tremendous sway over politics in the United States; but in few places is it more prevalent than in the arena of equal rights for homosexuals, particularly when it comes to same-sex marriage.

A Brief History

Both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality in their diagnostic materials as a mental illness. This contributed heavily to the stigma, systematic discrimination, and invisibility of homosexuality. In fact, “until 1987 the New York Times wouldn’t even print the word gay” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 243). However, during the last four decades Lesbian and Gay advocates have argued that civil benefits and privileges that accrue through marriage should not be provided exclusively to those who are allowed to marry. There has been a substantial push to allow same-sex marriage on the basis that it would serve equality by providing benefits such as health insurance, tax breaks, social security benefits, and access to adoption services, along with thousands of other legal and social benefits that are largely only available to heterosexuals. Since the government and the majority of its supporters apparently have a stake in the oppression of same-sex couples it is important that their motive and strategies be identified. Denike (2007) purports that religious doctrine is the primary strategy used to justify the presumption that marriage is for heterosexuals only, even though marriage statutes had nothing to say about the sex of the “two persons” until homosexuals began to turn to the courts to demand they include them. The first large push for inclusion began in early 1970. At this time “Lesbians and Gay men began challenging laws that prevented same-sex couples from marrying... [in response] the courts held that same-sex marriage bans were constitutional” (Kristen, 1999, p. 105). This left any change in those laws to the legislative process. Since the 1970's the courts, especially the Supreme Court, has scarcely wavered in its opinion in regards to the legality of gay marriage.

In the fall of 1996 the U.S. Congress (100 percent Judea-Christian) passed The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which allows states to prohibit same-sex marriage and deny the extension of any federal benefits to legitimately married Lesbian and Gay couples. The act passed easily with a vote of 85-14 in the Senate and 342-67 in the House of Representatives. It is important to note here that since marriage is a matter of state, not federal law, the passage of DOMA represents awfully abnormal behavior by the U.S. Congress. Never before in history has the federal government attempted to define marriage. Nevertheless, this landmark trend continues, extending past the institution of marriage. In 2005, The Christian Science Monitor published an article asserting that “Conservative Christian activists are fighting what they call the “homosexual agenda” by focusing on civil unions as well. “In 8 of 11 states, voters [in 2005] approved state constitutional amendments banning gay marriage – a clean sweep for gay marriage opponents – the ban extended to civil unions as well” (Knickerbocker, 2005, p. 2). This is exceptional because up until this point it could be argued, although not especially coherently, that opponents of gay marriage were simply defending the institution of marriage, and not legislating discrimination. Twelve states currently have statutes banning any same-sex unions, including civil unions. Twenty-six states have adopted amendments to their state constitution prohibiting same sex marriage. Also, twenty states have enacted statutory DOMA's. Same-sex marriage is currently only legal in one state: Massachusetts.

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While only in Massachusetts is same-sex marriage legal, it has company in Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New Hampshire, who all grant same-sex civil unions. According to Kosmin (2001), all of these states exceed the national average in population of residents who indicated they have “no religion.” Conversely, states that have enacted constitutional amendments that restrict the right to marry are overwhelmingly religious. The ten states with the highest numbers of Judea-Christian adherents all have passed constitutional amendments or statutes to ban same-sex partnerships. As is evident, high levels of Judea-Christian faith and same-sex discrimination correspond heavily. Moreover, states with large numbers of people who are not religious tend to be the most progressive when it comes to rights for homosexuals; this almost certainly because “religious law is fundamentally incompatible with the secular law of liberal democracy” (Denike, 2007, p. 71).

In matters of homosexuality the influence of religion is thoroughly evident overseas. Gay marriage and civil unions that grant full rights to same-sex couples are prevalent throughout Canada and Europe. The institution of marriage is open to anyone in Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain. All four of these countries boast a large atheist population: 44% in the Netherlands, 43% in Belgium, and close to 30% in Canada and Spain. Same-sex civil unions with full benefits are also granted in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Japan, the Czech Republic, Finland, and France among many others. [1] These countries have an extensive population who hold no belief in God whereas the most religious societies in the world: Nigeria, Uganda, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Belize, Syria, and the United States, have criminalized homosexuality. Punishments for engaging in homosexuality in these countries range from a fine to prison to death, or in the case of the United States, an effective caste system upheld by the historic and current political structure.

If your beliefs about the universe influence your actions, which most sane persons can agree on, it may prove well worthwhile to examine the representatives who control “law and order” in the United States.

The U.S. recently re-elected its forty-sixth president, George W. Bush, a conservative Christian. “Many people voted for George W. Bush in part because they wanted someone who was, like them, an evangelical Christian, in the white house” (Kwame, 2006, p. 15). This is not a new trend and George is not alone here; forty-four of our forty-six presidents have been of the Judea-Christian tradition. As has nearly 100% of our vice presidents, 90% of governors, 90% of the senate, nearly 100% of our Congress, and the entirety of the Supreme Court [2]. Is it fair to assume that only Christians dream of becoming presidents, congressmen, and judges? No. But is it fair to say that if you desire power it helps to be, or appear to be, a heterosexual-white-Christian-man? Certainly.

According to Gallup (2007), 86% or 258,000,000 Americans believe in God. 78% of those who believe in God believe that the Bible is either the actual word of God or the inspired word of God. That is approximately 234,000,000 people. The population of the United States is approximately 303,000,000. Gallup (2005) also conducted a poll in 2005 that revealed that, 56% of Americans think gay marriage is not valid, should not be recognized by law, and should carry no rights. This is the voting public and the pool from which our elected officials spring from [3] and most legislators do not like to be viewed as voting against religious principals for reasons which are apparent to even the dimmest wit.

Sodomy was long the cornerstone for the systematic discrimination against gays even though oral and anal sex is hardly exclusive to homosexuals. These discriminatory governmental laws are strictly influenced by matters of faith. “Marriage has been the only approved site for sexual activity, certainly pre-marital sex has been condemned, so has non-procreative sex, including same-sex partnerships and masturbation” (Ellison, 2006, p. 28). It doesn’t take an expert to realize that criminally prosecuting non-procreative sexual acts would correlate solidly with religious tenets. This type of religious hold has “invariably constrained the achievement of basic

legal recognition between homosexual couples, and for that matter, any other relationship that doesn't resemble the conjugal and procreative heterosexual model coddled within western monotheism" (Denike, 2007, p. 71).

Georgia: A Case Study

Clearly Judea-Christian beliefs are highly influential in matters such as gay marriage. An obvious illustration of this is what happened in the state of Georgia. In 2004 Georgia voters approved a statewide referendum to constitutionally define marriage as a union of one man and one woman. The people of Georgia resoundingly approved the constitutional amendment by a vote of 76% to 24%, with the majority of voters in each of the state's 159 counties casting their ballot in favor of the measure. According to Chapman (2007), the highest concentrations of votes in favor of the constitutional amendment were found in the extremely religious southeast's rural poverty belt [4] and in the southwest's "blackbelt" which contains the highest percentage of African Americans in the state. [5] This is amazing on three fronts. First, we have an entire state explicitly voting to amend their constitution to include a blatant discrimination clause; not even one of the state's 159 counties dissented.

Secondly, with Georgia's visible and recent history of legislative discrimination including slavery, Jim Crow laws, and struggles (against the state) to be granted full rights of citizens, logic may have rendered it impossible to pass such a discriminatory amendment. Furthermore, any person may have thought its passage exceptionally unachievable in the southwest where the overwhelming majority of the population is African American. Third, while the "word homosexuality is not even in the Bible" [6] (Papa, 2006, p. 60), the good book does expressly, and in no uncertain terms, condone if not advocate, slavery and sexual slavery amongst other things. [7] As can be seen, reason is not at work here. African Americans in Georgia can reasonably see that discrimination is wrong when it applies to them but rational thought eludes the voting public when the discrimination clause applies to an out-group. What we have here is selective reasoning, and there must be something at work behind this lack of simple balanced thought.

Georgia is a particularly religious state. Ninety percent of its residents identify themselves as Christian, and according to Chapman (2007), seventy-five percent attend church regularly. One could assume with general acuity that this has something to do with the way people vote on issues they consider to fall under their moral umbrella. This association is precisely why politicians pander to churches with a large number of adherents. The research by Chapman (2007) done for *Southeastern Geographer* backs up this assertion:

The southeastern and southwestern parts of Georgia are one of the most culturally conservative and deeply religious portions of the state... [In comparison] Support by urban blacks, where people are less likely to attend church, was weakest overall (Chapman, 2007, p. 27).

Chapman goes on:

We expect the larger the proportion of each county's population adhering to a conservative denomination to be positively associated with support for the ban on same sex marriage...the positions that churches hold in public and private lives of many black southerners, and the influence that church leaders can potentially wield cannot be understated (Chapman, 2007, p. 28).

In the latter half of his essay, Chapman goes on to dissect the voting trend in Clarke County. This particular county has the highest education levels in the state. The vote was the closest here. According to Chapman (2007), the amendment was approved by a slim 4% margin, 52% – 48%. This fact deserves some pondering. A meta-analysis conducted by Paul Bell in 2002 concluded that "Of 43 studies carried out since 1927 on the relationship between religious belief and educational attainment, all but four found an inverse connection"

(Dawkins p. 103). This means that the only place in Georgia where the amendment was even mildly contested was in what might be the least religious part of the state.

The relationships described in this case study of Georgia are telling. We have a state so overwhelmingly dominated by religious dogma that the majority of the voting population does not even consider recent history when voting on discriminatory laws that would have related directly to them less than 50 years prior. Georgia no doubt has residents that once fought for their civil rights now voting direct discrimination into the constitution which is testament to how much sway Christianity holds in Georgia. This is, by any measure, a bizarre state of affairs, especially when you consider that sexuality has nothing to do with government. In analyzing belief patterns in other states and countries, as stated earlier, we can clearly see that Georgia is not an exception.

Religion, particularly Christianity, may be one of the only institutions in the United States to receive the unqualified and unregulated support of the government. And yet, religion obscures doubt where doubt distinctly exists, allowing the implausible and the demonstrably false to attain supremacy over the facts (Harris, 2005).

Detractions

Some argue that even though there is a legal component to marriage it is very much a religious institution, and therefore religious groups have the right to limit the freedoms of sexual minorities. However, marriage predates recorded history. This is not to say that marriage is not a religious institution presently, it is only to say that its origins are, at best, unclear. Secondly, if marriage is based on/in religion, the state and federal governments by providing civil benefits to married couples are in direct violation of the United States Constitution, as it explicitly states that government make no law respecting religion.

Another similarly bizarre argument made by same-sex marriage opponents is that to extend marriage rights to homosexuals is nothing more than giving them “special rights.” This message is most compelling to working-class white heterosexuals who feel that everyone gets a better break than they do. I can understand this frame, but if letting people marry equals “special rights” then it is heterosexuals who are reserved these unearned privileges. If heterosexuals do not have “special rights” by virtue that they can marry, then granting homosexuals marriage-rights does not equal “special rights.”

James Wood (1999) argues that the church, by its unbreakable intersections with public life, stands to make substantial contributions. This is no doubt true; it is obvious the church has influence in public matters. However, that contribution with regard to gay rights is almost exclusively negative. The full role of the church within the state ensures that the government cannot be neutral on matters of morality and values. As a supposedly fair people, we must work towards the ideas of religious neutrality and secularism if we wish to see advancement for civil rights.

Conclusion

The opposition to secular advocacy is fierce. Many organizations seek to gain visibility and encourage open debate within their communities. They may appeal to the courts and their respective law makers but are often shut out by Christian influence in politics. This major obstacle must be overcome if advocates wish to see any growing equality. The fact is that the United States is in large part, a Christian country. This impediment alone can be daunting to the progressive thinker. It may seem at times impossible to change a government that is entrenched in the dogma of a particular religion. Advocates must be persistent, dedicated and educated to make even the smallest difference. Every small advance in the cause of secularism ensures that minority

groups, such as gays, will be treated more equally and less subject to the vicissitudes of religion. The fact is that Christian ideas about the universe are in direct conflict with logical coherence, law and basic human rights. Gay rights, along with various other civil rights for women and minorities have suffered incalculable setbacks due to the direct influence of piety. For this reason, it is imperative that religious doctrine be separate from civil regulation. Catering to majority values ensures that those values, in this case Judea-Christian, will be unethically imposed on others through the instrument of law.

Notes

[1] For more information see: The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission's website: <http://www.iglhrc.org/site/iglhrc/content.php?type=1&id=9>

[2] A lengthy book could be written about the influence of the United States Supreme Court Justices. They are all Christian, are all appointed, and are the most powerful entity in matters of law.

[3] Note that the actual elected and appointed officials of the United States tend to be much more religious than is reflected in the general population. The entire congress, Senate, Executive branch, and Supreme Court justices are nearly all of the Judea-Christian persuasion. See <http://www.adherents.com> for further information

[4] The southeastern part of Georgia is, in majority, covered by two counties, Hartshorn and Walcott. These counties approved the marriage amendment by 89%. Pierce County is also located in the southeast and approved the ban by 94%.

[5] The southwest counties of Georgia voted above the state's already high average, with 80% – 89% of the population voting in favor of the amendment. This section of the state is known for the legacy of the Antebellum Plantation system.

[6] Since the struggle for gay rights began in the 70's the word "homosexual" has been added to some versions on the bible, such as the New English version.

[7] The actual passages are substantial, for a few please see: Leviticus 25: 44-46, Leviticus 20:18, Exodus 21:7-11, Ephesians 6:5, 1 Peter: 2:18, Colossians 3:22, 1 Corinthians 14:34, Deuteronomy 22: 20-21, Timothy 6:1-4. Jesus also endorses these practices in Matthew 5:18-19 among others.

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