

Society's Evolving Perception of Homosexuality

According to John C. Gonsiorek, an associate editor of *Homosexuality: Social, Psychological, and Biological Issues* (1982), "...the issue of whether homosexuality per se is a sign of psychopathology, psychological maladjustment, or disturbance has been answered, and the answer is that it is not. The studies reviewed and the findings ought to be the touchstone of further theory and research in the study of homosexuality, because psychological tests are the most carefully designed, reliable, valid, and objective measures of adjustment in the armamentarium of the behavior sciences." His clear, specific wording accurately gives an idea of how homosexuality was viewed in the early 80's. The APA had just made the decision to remove homosexuality from its official list of psychiatric disorders nine years before the publishing of his book. This was the time when people wanted to find out if there really was any evidence linking homosexuality to a person's psyche. "Society at large does not know what to think about gays. Social taboos on discussing sexuality, especially gay sexuality, have left a void in society's understanding of gays. This void in understanding, though, has been filled to overflowing with stereotypes, prejudices, and unexamined fears, which in concert have largely governed the development of social policy toward gays," Richard D. Mohr states in the first few sentences of his introduction in *Gays/Justice: A Study of Ethics, Society, and Law* (1988).

Homosexuals are, indeed, accepted far more now than they ever have been. However, I think a better term to use is "tolerated". It isn't so much that society welcomes homosexuality, but there is a better understanding of it. The extensive research that has convinced society it isn't a choice has molded minds into tolerating different sexual identities. Much like African Americans in the 60's, homosexuals are simply dealt with or avoided altogether. "Indeed, I believe that an examination of the various modes of the social oppression of gays would reveal that whether gays are or are not objectively like an ethnic minority, it is like an ethnic minority that society treats gays. Further it is in the modes of treatment rather than in the nature of their objects that the inequalities and other iniquities inflicted on minorities chiefly resides...If gays are treated socially as ethnic minorities are treated, there are major issues of equality both social and constitutional that are raised by the treatment," Mohr continues in his introduction.

The treatment of homosexuals stems from the stereotypes that have filled the void that ignorance leaves (Canning, 2003). Society labels lesbians as women that want to be, act, or look like men, or are more commonly referred to as "dykes". Gay men are viewed as those who want to be, or at least look and act like women, and are referred to as "queers". These stereotypes of fraudulent genders provide the materials and tools that cause gays and lesbians to be the butts of ethnic-like jokes. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg; there are far worse stereotypes and actions against homosexuals.

Mohr states, "Another set of stereotypes revolves around gays as a pervasive, sinister, conspiring, and corruptive threat. The core stereotype here is the gay person as child molester and more generally, as sex crazed maniac." This is the type of ignorance that brings fear of the destination of family and civilization itself to life. False generalizations play into these stereotypes, but there is more to it than that. If researchers carry out a study with a select group of gay males and the results count against homosexuality, then without further studies, those results will become the basis of numerous arguments. But if more studies are carried out the increase in the amount of data can disprove the initial study. Stereotypes, then are not the products of bad science, but are social constructions that perform central functions in maintaining society's conception of itself (Canning, 2003).

The stereotypes of gays as child molesters, sex-crazed maniacs, and civilization destroyers have given the family unit a false image of total innocence. So, basically, if homosexuality is connected to the issue in any way it could easily be used as a scapegoat for the truth. Unjust stereotyping functions socially to keep an individual's sexuality contained. Therefore, it is often perceived that the problem of how to address one's considerable sexual drives can and should be answered with repression. This implies that the forces evoking homosexual actions are out in society where the "fags" are, not within one's own breast. "For the repressed homosexual, this stereotype has an especially powerful allure - by hating it consciously, he subconsciously appears to save himself from himself, at least as the ruse does not exhaust the considerable psychic energies required to maintain it..." Mohr also says.

Many people, especially those who are persistently downtrodden and so lack a firm sense of self to begin with tend, either, troubles as a matter of bad luck or as the result of an innocent mistake by others – as anything but an injustice indicating something wrong with society. And, furthermore, gays are subject to violence and harassment based simply on their perceived status rather than because of actions they have performed. The most extreme form of antigay violence is queer bashing (Canning, 2003) – where groups of young men target another man who they suppose is gay and kick and beat him unconscious and sometimes to death amid a torrent of taunts and slurs. Cases involving these attacks rarely reach the courts, but the ones that do are marked by inequitable procedures and results. For example, in 1984, a District of Columbia judge handed suspended sentences to "queerbashers" whose victim had been stalked, beaten, stripped at knife point, slashed, kicked, threatened with castration, and pissed on, because the judge thought the boys were good at heart – after all they went to a religious prep school.

Furthermore, these social issues with homosexuality fueled my desire to choose a topic that would allow me to research and properly discuss controversial truths and ideas as well as express personal thoughts and opinions. I knew that I wanted to research and uncover important information that not many people are aware of due to the influence of religion. In my discussion, I hope to shed light on significant information that will enlighten individuals in the community and encourage them to challenge their own personal belief system. My feelings for this topic are as strong and deep as they would be for any other topic I might have chosen because I find it best to write about a matter that is of great importance to me. This enables me to express my opinions in a very compassionate way bridging the gap between the information presented and the information learned. It's important to recognize how people are discriminated in this society based on lifestyle choices and other miscellaneous details that have no bearing on their ability to fulfill their duties. It's unfair to limit rights of an individual because of a characteristic that might be considered "unacceptable" by the public. Who's to decide what is and isn't acceptable? The government and religious organizations clearly aim to regulate this by any means necessary, but do they function as two different entities trying to accomplish this? This topic is of significant interest to me, so I will arduously strive to offer great information as well as perspectives.

The "Separation" of Church and State

The founding of the United States was based on the idea of religious freedom, in fact, this very right is guaranteed to us in the First Amendment. In this country's infancy, government officials went through great pains to make certain that the ideas of the church and the government remained separate entities. In 1811, President Madison went as far as to veto a bill passed by congress to travel to D.C and support the churches efforts to raise funds for the poor (Gaddy, 2008). Now, it seems that this line between politics and religion has become blurred. In a country where the majority of people are religious, and majority rules, how can religion not infiltrate its way into

politics? In his book *First Freedom First: A Citizen's Guide to Protecting Religious Liberty and the Separation of Church and State*, Dr. Welton Gaddy warns us about the idea of majoritarianism. This idea constitutes the reason religious liberty disputes in local communities are resolved by majority opinion. Gaddy insists that “those of us who believe in the wall of separation must get to work formulating strategies for educating people about the meaning and importance of religious liberty, especially as it pertains to protecting minority rights (2008).”

As it stands today, the separation between church and state is nothing more than a mere myth of the ideal way to run a country; it is not the reality that we live in. As I stated previously, the majority of citizens in the United States of America have religious affiliations. According to recent information collected by the United States Census Bureau, only 16.1% of the country's population has no religious affiliation at all, so they will not be influenced to make decisions based on religious beliefs, practice, or influence. This, however, does not hold true for the 78.4% of Christians that make up the U.S, nor the 4.7% of people that follow a religion other than Christianity. It becomes quite clear that in US politics laws are decided by the majority of public opinion, so doesn't religion, in fact, influence public opinion on political issues?

Debates over the policies protecting gay rights have occupied a very important place in the American public agenda for many years. Forums have been setup at places ranging from the US Congress to public universities in order to gain feedback on the subject. Candidates running for political office have also felt the need to state their public opinions on the matter. “For some, gay rights represent the just culmination of campaigns for full citizenship. For others, gay rights symbolize the unacceptable but inevitable excesses of a culture spiraling out of control (Herman, 1997).” In 2000, for example, the presidential candidates debated on homosexual matters and Vermont State legislators faced problems getting re-elected due to issues concerning homosexuality. Through looking at the many hindrances in policies that homosexuals face, as well as the role that protesters following the Christian Right play in attempting to keep these policies in place, it will be determined whether the opinions by leaders in this movement have influence over the decisions that voters make at the polls and over public opinion of homosexuals in general. Followers of this movement have been most vocal in their disagreement with providing homosexuals certain rights. Their work has both put Christian views in the forefront of political and media attention to strongly affect policies addressing homosexual issues.

Policies Prohibiting and Protecting Homosexuality

In his article “The Shifting Foundations of Public Opinion about Gay Rights,” Paul Brewer finds that public attitudes toward homosexuality have changed dramatically over the past few decades. Brewer concludes that the majority of US citizens have more tolerant attitudes about homosexuality, and that hostility toward openly gay individuals has decreased severely.

This change, however, can be linked to a heavily covered media event pertaining to gay rights, or anti-gay rights propaganda (2003). From the early to mid 1970s the public opinion that homosexuality is always wrong decreased because there was strong promotion of peace, and accepting human beings for who they were. This era was put to a halt, with the rising voiced of Christian fundamentalists like the Moral Majority in the late 1970s and extending to the late 1980s. The leader of the Moral Majority, already had a head start in media coverage due to the fact that he began as a television preacher. Needless to say, during the rise of this group public opinion that homosexuality was always wrong had begun to increase. Only after a long period of time did the percentage begin to decrease once more beginning in the 1990s. Brewer speculates that the antigay agenda had begun to soften, because they had begun to meet their goal. In 1998, a terrible antigay act of violence gained enough media coverage to substantially change public opinion. A student at

the University of Wyoming, Matthew Shepherd, was brutally beaten, murdered, and left to hang for other students to find. The media coverage of this event was huge, and US citizens began to rethink their strong dislike of gays (Brewer, 2003).

“The literature on public opinion and attitudes towards gays suggests that certain voter characteristics correlate with tolerance toward gays. An important empirical question is whether or not voters take those predispositions with them into the voting booth when considering anti-gay initiatives (Witt and Alm, 1997).” To get a better view of the laws that are currently restricting and/or protecting homosexual rights, it is important to look at some of the key laws, policies, and restrictions that homosexuals currently face in the year 2009 and have faced in the past. Sodomy laws in the United States, laws primarily intended to outlaw gay sex, were historically pervasive, but were invalidated by the 2003 Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas*. While they were originally intended to outlaw sex acts between homosexuals, many definitions were broad enough to make certain heterosexual acts illegal as well. The decision to invalidate sodomy laws was made based on the argument that private sexual conduct is protected by the liberty rights implicit in the due process clause of the US constitution. Though many states had already repealed this law, the decision made sure that other more conservative states did not enforce sodomy laws on its citizens (Witt and McCorkle, 1997).

The California Insurance Equality Act, also known as AB 2208, “is a non-discrimination statute that prohibits insurance providers from issuing policies or plans that treat registered domestic partners and married spouses differently. It requires all policies and plans that provide benefits to spouses or registered domestic partners to provide them to both categories and to do so in an identical manner (EQCA, 2004).” This law was a big step forward for the state of California in contrast to other states. Some insurance companies only provide coverage to married couples, while others may extend this privilege to civil unions. The problem comes with domestic partnerships. As it is known, only one state thus far allows gay marriage, while few others allow civil unions, but there are select states that have no official classifications for homosexual couples. This lack of classification makes it so that insurance providers do not necessarily have to provide coverage to a spouse that is not recognized by the state in some way. California, though it neither allows gay marriage or civil unions, has made it possible for partners not married or in a union to receive the full benefits of a spouse.

For years homosexual couples have been adopting children, but only recently has it begun to be done out in the open. In the past, one partner would officially adopt the child, while the other would pretend to be a close friend or roommate. This was not necessarily done because gay adoption was illegal, it was done in fear that couples would begin to be discriminated against, and have a difficult time obtaining a child. So far, though it allows for homosexuals to obtain foster children, the state of Florida is the only state that explicitly bans gay adoption. To elaborate, Florida is the only state to clarify that homosexuals may not adopt, while other hide beneath the cover-up of marriage. A prime example is that Utah does not allow unmarried couples to adopt, but at the same time, it does not allow gay or lesbian couple to marry, making it impossible for them to ever adopt in that state (US News, *Emerging Gay Adoption Fight Shares Battle Lines of Same Sex Marriage Debate*, 2008).

Gays have been widely subject to discrimination in employment as well. The federal government themselves explicitly discriminate against gays in the armed forces, the CIA, the FBI, the National Security Agency, and the state department. State and local governments regularly fired gay teachers, police and fire personnel, social workers, and anyone who has contact with the public before occupations and institutions became more gay-friendly. These kinds of discrimination affect central component of a meaningful life. Therefore, the ability of people to have significant intimate relations is affected. It becomes difficult for individuals to live together in a same-sex relationship

without their sexual orientation being visible in public. “Illegality, discrimination, and the absorption by gays of society’s hatred of them – all interact to impede or block altogether the ability of gays and lesbians to create and maintain significant personal relations with loved ones,” Mohr explains.

Of all of the laws surrounding homosexuality in the United States, not one seems to get as much attention as gay marriage. At first glance, the right to marry may not seem as an important part of the fight to end discrimination, but one may begin to notice that some policies prohibiting homosexuals from obtaining certain rights, in turn, depend on the right to marry. The subject of gay marriage arouses a plethora of media attention, as well as attention of multiple religious organizations. What is it about gay marriage that seems to be so special?

It seems that the controversy surrounds how the term “marriage” is defined. Many citizens have grown up thinking of this term as identifying the union under God between a man and a woman. To redefine the term, for many, is to redefine Christian values and beliefs. This presents the long feud between the church and the state and where attention from the media comes into play. Is it right of a state to attempt to redefine something that is of a religious tradition? By covering issues surrounding gay marriage, the media is, in a sense, continuing coverage of a long-time historic battle over the separation between church and state.

The Christian Opposition

“From the first stirrings of gay rights activism, the move to provide lesbian and gay legal equality was resisted (Herman, 1997).” Though opposition came from several different perspectives (for example; spread of disease and the diminution of private-sector freedoms), none were as great as opposition based on religious grounds. In the eyes of most Christian denominations, homosexuality is a sin condemned in Holy Scriptures. Many people have experienced the cultural normalization of homosexuality as a deliberate attack on almost all Christian beliefs. Acquiring rights for homosexuals was only a mere symptom of allowing them to become normalized in American society. The increasing acceptance of homosexuality, particularly within the religious institutions, became a sign of godlessness and impending destruction. That is, the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian sexuality tested the very foundation of orthodox religious beliefs (Herman, 1997).

In the early 1970s a movement known as the Christian Right developed and it soon made anti-gay agendas a major part of its concerns. By the 1990s, the Christian Right became a powerful social force that mobilized grassroots opposition to homosexuality and caused numerous setbacks to gay rights on both a local and national level. Herman defines the Christian Right as a specific set of religious beliefs that can largely be reduced to two key tenets. The first is the belief that the Christian Gospels, and to some extent the Hebrew Bible, are to be taken authoritatively as the word of God. Along with this is the idea of reading the writings in an attempt to interpret them in association with the changing times is an abomination. The second tenet is the belief in the “end of days”, which is mostly held by American conservative Protestants. “Christian Right” was termed predominantly in the United States and Canada to describe an array of right-wing Christian political and social movements and organizations that show strong support of conservative social and political values. The movement of the Christian Right largely consists of many conservative theological beliefs stemming from Pentecostalism, Mormonism, Lutheranism and Catholicism, which are theologically stricter than more mainstream denominations.

A key factor in understanding Christian opposition to gay rights is to understand the history of the Christian Right movement as well as to look at recent activities and publishing of those who are part of it. Though conservative Christians have long spoken out about sexual moral issues on an individual basis, there was no large unified move to address the subject until the establishment of the *Christianity Today* in 1956. *Christianity Today* is the leading American conservative Protestant

publication, over a forty year period (Herman, 1997). Though its concerns were largely about sexual promiscuity, pornography businesses, and obscene advertising when it first began, by the late-60s it began to speak out about homosexuality explicitly.

In her book *Suburban Warriors*, Lisa McGirr discusses how the foundation of the Christian Right began in suburban areas. According to McGirr the suburbs of the 1960s were key areas for establishing the movement. These areas were still developing, and often, neighbors were very spread-out and lived long distances from one another, which made developing a real sense of community difficult. This is where the church began to play a huge role, similar to how it was with the Civil Rights Movement. The church became essential to residents getting to know one another, sharing views, and holding social gatherings. It was through the church that the Christian Right was able to become popular in the community. Church officials preached the views, and the people followed, eager to be a part of the church community and a movement that would both foster and peddle their beliefs. As the church grew, and as the suburbs became more populated, the Christian Right slowly gained the ability to move to the forefront of American beliefs (McGirr, 2001).

How has Christianity Gained so Much Power?

According to Herman, much of the Christian Right's power within the American political system was due to their extravagant turnout rate at the polls. The voters that believe in the Christian Right are also highly motivated and driven to express their viewpoint on issues they care about. As I stated before, part of the reason that they feel so passionately about these beliefs, is that it gives them a sense of belonging, community, and purpose. They avidly attend political events, and travel door to door in order to get literature out to the populous. Members of the Christian Right are willing to do the electoral work needed to see their candidate elected. A prime example of this is the establishment of the Moral Majority and the work that they did in order to see that their presidential candidate was indeed elected (Herman, 1997).

The Moral Majority was started by Jerry Falwell, a well known television preacher during the 1980s (Tamney and Johnson, 1983). They thought of themselves as more of an organization rather than a religious group. Due to their high level of devotion, the Christian right does not need to monetarily compensate these people for their work. Simply knowing that their actions are making a difference in their campaign is enough and this makes them a cherished resource for the Christian Right (Herman, 1997). For the above reasons, the Moral Majority has long credited itself with giving Ronald Reagan about two-thirds of the white conservative vote. This uprising in the Christian conservative attitude accounts for the reason that public opinion regarding homosexual relationships as always wrong rose during the 1980s.

The Library of Congress is currently doing an exhibition in hopes of displaying that the colonies that were to eventually become the United States of America, were founded by individuals with deep religious faiths. On the website it states, "In 1776 the United States of America were settled by men and women of deep religious convictions who in the seventeenth century crossed the Atlantic Ocean to practice their faith freely." The exhibit displays how the country began with great religious fervor, often having a church among the first buildings to be established in the colonies. After years passed on this new land, the religious intensity died down, and did not become of great importance again until immigrants began to move onto the land. "The efforts of the Founders of the American nation to define the role of religious faith in public life and the degree to which it could be supported by public officials that was not inconsistent with the revolutionary imperatives of the equality and freedom of all citizens is the central question which this exhibition explores," states the Library of Congress (Religion and the Founding of the American Republic).

Due to the fact that Christianity was indeed prominent in this country since its inception, it only makes sense that this religion remain at ahead of all the others throughout its history. The United States of America still remains one of the most religious nations in the world. The principle of separation of church and state came about after debate and a series of redrafting by the House and Senate in 1789. It is stated as the first portion of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . .” If church and state are to remain two separate entities, then why is it that they seem to intertwine so often? After all, there has not been a president elected yet, that has not had to demonstrate a strong Christian faith. To be of Christian faith is important because over half of the U.S. population is Christian, and people are hesitant to choose a leader that has strikingly different beliefs than their own.

The Church’s Role in the Civil Rights Movement

The success of African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, further proves that it is only a myth that church and state are separate entities. Many of the African American political figures voiced their platforms in a church. A primary example, of course, is the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Churches were essential to uniting African American within communities. So, naturally, when rallies for needed to be held, the church was the primary place for them and many preachers became the leaders. They were not only religious leaders not only, but they also led congregations to speak out against unjust treatment. This use of the church as central to this movement, arguably, presents the greatest disparity. While the church was almost fully incorporated within the civil rights movement, in contrast, it is the primary vessel being used to rally against the gay rights movement. As stated before, religious affiliations have a very strong sway over the public actions of individuals (Williams, 2003). African Americans worked hard to make it seem that the church was on their side, so eventually the majority of the United States began to stand on their side as well. This was seen in the establishment of the Christian Right as well.

The book entitled *The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement* edited by Sean Gill, strives to show how the gay rights movement is attempting to implement the ideas mentioned above. Individuals in the Gay Christian Movement (GCM) are attempting to turn around the theory that religion, specifically Christianity, is fully against them. Though the GCM began in London, England and not the United States, it still works as a primary example of gay rights activists making Christianity work for them. This movement calls for a new Christian ethic grounded on love rather than prescriptive legalism.

A similar organization, founded in the U.S. much later, called the Gay Christian Network describes itself as “a nonprofit ministry supporting Christians worldwide who happen to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Our mission, ‘sharing Christ’s light and love for all,’ is carried out in 5 primary directions, to impact individuals, families, communities, churches, and the world.” The statement of faith for this organization is a lot more detailed than that of the one in London.

We worship one God, creator of heaven and earth, who is revealed to us in the Bible as the eternal ‘I AM’. We proclaim that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, the sinless Son of God, who was crucified for our sins and rose again on the third day. We affirm that the Bible is Holy Scripture, divinely inspired and authoritative, and not merely a human work. We believe that worship, prayer, obedience, Bible study, love, fellowship, forgiveness and service are all important aspects in the life of a Christian believer, having been saved by the grace of God and not by our own human efforts. We believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians are full participants in God’s kingdom, and that the ways of holiness and the ways

of sinfulness are equally available to them as to others. Recognizing this, we strive to live holy lives: turning to prayer, Scripture, and the leading of the Holy Spirit to discern God's will. We affirm the need for the Body of Christ to be united in service to God. To that end, we recognize that personal conviction plays a part in many of the specific elements of Christian practice. We affirm that love and respect is owed to each member of this community as brothers and sisters in Christ, and this despite differences in personal conviction that will encompass questions involving sex, intimate relationships and the Debate.” We look forward to being resurrected with Christ on the final day (*Statement of Faith*, The Gay Christian Network, <http://www.gaychristian.net/statementoffaith.php>).

The fact that the United States was behind Britain in establishing an organization that opened their arms to homosexuals who wanted to embrace Christianity says a lot about the strict Christian opposition in this country. Even though the organization has been in existence for about eight years, it only received media attention in 2006 on the Dr. Phil show. This is a perfect example of how the media flocks to the issue of gay marriage, but shies away from portraying homosexuals who strongly believe in God and attend church services. Due to this lack of media attention and conflicting opinions about whether it is ethical for homosexuals to worship God while living a homosexual lifestyle, it appears that the gay rights movement will continue to be unsuccessful in using the church as a vessel to achieve full equality.

The Verdict

The trials that the gay rights movement is facing with obtaining equal opportunity and rights in the United States of America, serves as an example that the church is a strong force within American politics. Traditional Christian values, and ideas of the Christian Right are imbedded in the very ideals of American values. These innate values, along with the prominence of Christianity in this country, greatly shape public opinion and the decisions that the public makes when voting. After thoroughly investigating this topic, I feel that because the church has too much favor within society and government there is virtually no way to pass laws that present challenges to its religious doctrines. The number of laws and policies that exist to promote gay rights are an indication of where this country is in terms of legislative influence. These factors serve to prove that the church and state are yet to be properly separated. Unless the public learns to completely detach themselves from their religious beliefs, do what is best for people, and not necessarily what upholds their religious stance, this democracy will always be at the mercy of religion.

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