

Christian Conservatives and the LGBTQ Community in a Pluralistic World

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to negotiate a path for peace in modern secular society between conservative Christians and the LGBTQ community. First, I will argue that religion and sexuality are both constructs, which are more similar than dissimilar. Second, I will argue that while each religion is irreconcilably different from the other, it is still possible for multiple religious constructs to exist and thrive with equal rights in the same society. This will demonstrate how a society might overcome the impasse between multiple and opposing religious and sexual constructs by embracing a pluralism that allows all constructs to grow and thrive in the midst of disagreement. Finally, I will suggest that the conservative Christian community should divest themselves from seeking cultural hegemony in this multi-construct world.

Keywords: LGBTQ, conservative Christian, construct, hegemony, overlapping consensus, divestment

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Introduction

Conservative Christians and the LGBTQ community are seldom bedfellows with a common cause. The former often lash out publicly against the latter with the latter occasionally lashing back. The debate over gay marriage is a bitter source of conflict between these two groups. Nevertheless, the persistent presence of conservative religionists is unlikely to abate in the near future. How will this conflict continue to shape up in the coming decades, and how might it be resolved in a way amenable to both communities?

In this paper, I will attempt to negotiate a path for peace in modern secular society between conservative Christians and the LGBTQ community. First, I will argue that religion and sexuality are both constructs, which are more similar than dissimilar. Second, I will appropriate the work of Stephen Prothero and Alfred Stepan to argue that while each religion is irreconcilably different from the other, it is still possible for multiple religious constructs to exist and thrive with equal rights in the same society. This will allow me to demonstrate how a society might overcome the impasse between multiple and opposing religious and sexual constructs by embracing a pluralism that allows all constructs to grow and thrive in the midst of disagreement. Finally, using the writings of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, I will suggest that the conservative Christian community should divest itself from seeking cultural hegemony in this multi-construct world.

Innateness and Social Construction

My goal in this section is to relate religious identity and sexual identity by identifying both as social constructs. For the purpose of brevity, the nature of religious identity's social construction will not be addressed, and I will focus on sexual identity as a social construct. To speak of social constructs is to say that "our social and even...our physical world [is] a human enterprise, a human invention...[O]ur understanding of the world is not based on objective facts, truths, or realities, but on more or less consensual social constructions.... We are born into a world that has been socially constructed through cultural prescriptions, taboos, beliefs, assumptions, and activities, all developed through the history of a particular culture" (Freud, 1994, p. 28). In the formation of sexual identity, there is a disagreement in the literature about the nature of sexual identity formation. As Thomas Caramagno (2002) observes, "Even as biologists are formulating deterministic models for sexual behavior, cultural anthropologists and sociologists, observing disparate social groups worldwide, argue that sexuality may be as much a product of history, culture, and ideology as it is of nature" (p. 97). For example, studies of biological causes for sexual orientation focusing on the hypothalamus lead some to conclude that a group of cells in that part of the brain leads to the formation of sexual orientation; however, those who favor a culturally constructed view of sexual orientation may respond that "[i]t is possible that brain structure changes in response to behavior, rather than preceding or causing it.... Brain cells can rearrange their neuronal connections in response to environmental demands, although how much is unknown" (p. 101).

There are three reasons I want to offer for why it may be more preferable to view sexual identity as constructed rather than biologically innate. The first is the relative contemporaneity of viewing sexuality "as a distinct identity category rather than a

practice” (Freud, 1994, p. 40). Only as recently as the 19th century were the categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” invented. Before that, people had “sexual preferences” but not categorized sexual identities (p. 40). As anthropologist Jenell Williams Paris (2011) notes, this equating of “what [we] want, sexually speaking” with “who [we] are” is a contemporary and constructed phenomenon (p. 19).

The second reason has to do with an observation by Michael Foucault, expounded here by Margaret Farley (2006), that “power shapes the experience of sexuality, and sexuality constitutes and structures sex” (p. 19). For Foucault, sex “is not something ‘in itself,’ reducible to a bodily minimum of organ, instinct, and goal;” rather, “‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’ are historical social constructs, dependent on a particular configuration of power in a specific historical context” (p. 19). As Margaret Farley explains, “What this means is that cultural and social forces shape our sexual desires, so that what is sexually charged (whether thin bodies or plump ones, uncovered breasts or covered, broad shoulders or great height or whatever) in one era or place may not be in another” (p. 20).

Finally, there may be a great danger in giving sexual orientation a purely biological cause. As Margaret Farley observes, “[t]he requirement of finding some biological explanation for innate homosexuality risks highlighting it as an anomaly—since we don’t keep searching for the gene that explains heterosexuality” (p. 295). There is plenty of reason to believe “that once the specific mechanisms for sexual orientation are discovered, anti-gay groups will finance the development of medical techniques to reprogram genetic codes and produce only heterosexuals, or use genetic fingerprinting to ‘out’ LGBTs even before they are born so that deprogramming or persecution can begin in infancy” (Caramagno, 2002, p. 110).

The purpose here has been to highlight the sexual identity’s socially constructed nature in order to place sexuality on the same plane as religious identity. Equating the socially constructed nature of sexuality with the socially constructed nature of religion is necessary to establish them as equal partners in the endeavor of peaceful co-existence.

Diverse Identities in a Shared World

Currently, the debate between conservative Christians and the LGBTQ community in the United States is locked in a toxic ideological stalemate. As New Testament scholar Richard Hays (1996) observes, “The public discussion of this matter has been dominated by insistently ideological voices: on one side, gay rights activists demanding the church’s unqualified acceptance of homosexuality; on the other, unqualified condemnation of homosexual [people]” (p. 380). It is unlikely that either side will fully acquiesce and accept the opposing community’s conditions, so how might we find a way past this stalemate in a way that maintains the beliefs and civil rights of both groups? I believe the answer may be found within religion, particularly the relationships between co-existing religions and the practice of interfaith dialogue.

Irreconcilable Differences

As Stephen Prothero (2010) writes, “Some people are sure that the only foundation on which interreligious civility can be construed is the dogma that all religions are one” (P. 335). Prothero is not one of them. He notes,

No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same. Capitalism and socialism are so obviously at odds that their differences hardly bear mentioning. The same goes for democracy and monarchy. Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same. (p. 1)

To do so, he continues, “is dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue . . . [and makes] the world more dangerous by blinding us to the clashes of religions that threaten us worldwide. . . . What we need on this furiously religious planet is a realistic view of where religious rivals clash and where they can cooperate” (p. 2-4).

I would offer that we need a similar view regarding those rivals adhering to different sexual identity constructs as well. One might even argue “that sexual identity should be thought of *as a religion* and given equal protection status on that basis” (Caramagno, 2002, p. 199). As Thomas Caramagno notes, “The Constitution guarantees that each citizen is free to define his or her own understanding of the mystery and meaning of human life . . . [therefore] the state cannot impose sanctions on LGBT’s right to define themselves and the meaning of their lives even if these meanings are viewed as heretical by orthodox churches” (p. 199). The debate between conservative Christians and the LGBTQ community should not attempt to force one community to acquiesce its belief structure to the other; rather, the goal should be to learn how to cooperate while still acknowledging the very real boundaries and differences between the two groups (Prothero, 2010, p. 336). What kind of society would be required for this to happen?

Diversity and Overlapping Consensus

In the current U.S. political environment, the debate concerning LGBTQ rights and religious rights “is framed as an either/or binary: one side *must* reap the lion’s share of rights at the expense of the other” (Caramagno, 2002, p. 193). The problem with such a binary is that it is extremely homogenizing. One side *must* conform to the beliefs of the other, and this does violence to both groups. What is needed is a public sphere in which both groups, while yet disagreeing, can arrive at an “overlapping consensus” concerning issues of public justice (Rawls, 2011, p. 105). Charles Taylor (1993) explains,

[Overlapping Consensus] is [when] different groups . . . although holding incompatible fundamental views of theology, metaphysics, human nature, and so on, would come to an agreement on certain norms that ought to govern human behavior. Each would have its own way of justifying this from out of its profound background conception. (p. 105)

Taylor notes elsewhere, however, that such an “overlapping consensus between different founding views on a common philosophy of civility is something quite new in history and relatively untried. It is consequently hazardous” (p. 47) He goes on to point out that there is often mistrust between those of competing worldview groups, so is there a way to overcome mutual distrust and share a public space with those with whom we deeply disagree about the meaning of the good life?

Alfred Stepan (2011) may have provided such a way forward in his essay, “The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes.” In it, he advocates what he refers to as the “respect all, positive cooperation, principled distance” model of religion and state relations as seen in Senegal, Indonesia, and India, as an ideal way of dealing with worldview diversity (p. 126-127). As opposed to falsely homogenizing diverse populations into Christian or secularist norms, as in the west, the “respect all” model accommodates both the majority and minority worldviews (p. 127). This can be seen, for example, in the obligatory paid holidays in these three countries. As Stepan observes, “the three ‘respect all’ polities (Senegal, Indonesia, and India) have eighteen obligatory paid holidays for the majority religion but *even more*, twenty-three, for the minority religions” (p. 127). Western countries like the U.S. and France, by contrast, offer no obligatory paid holidays for minority religious faiths (p. 127).

In such a model it seems that an overlapping consensus has become a reality. In India, the constitution allows for “some financial support for all religions” (p. 132). Indonesia allows “Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Catholic, and Protestant organizations, as well as Muslim ones . . . [to] apply for financial support to carry out their functions to the section in the Ministry of Religion dedicated to their religion” (p. 132). In Senegal, Stepan observes, “[T]he constant mutual rituals of respect, between the state and all religions and between all religions and the state, have facilitated policy cooperation in some sensitive areas of human-rights abuses” (p. 132). According to Stepan, this has “facilitated an atmosphere in which religious leaders have felt free to make arguments *from within Islam* against practices and policies that violate human rights” (p. 132).

Such a multi-vocal, heterogeneous society of mutually exclusive yet cooperative worldviews, while imperfect, is possible. Conservative Christians and LGBTQ groups should strive for that kind of society here in the U.S. in which all may self-identify as they please as well as disagree on the nature of the good life as they please. For conservative Christians, this will mean holding to their theological understanding that sex is supposed to be between one man and one woman, while allowing others to define and act out of their sexual identities with the same freedom as those who act out of various religious identities.

The Roadblock and Divestment

The type of pluralism I advocated in the previous section may provide a way forward, but it faces a roadblock in the form of conservative Christians themselves. Thomas Caramagno (2002) writes, “Doubtless, consensus between religions can be achieved on some issues through mutual respect, but the most vocal anti-gay rights leaders also tend to be the least tolerant of competing religions” (p. 47). Christian activist Randall Terry has claimed, “Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are

called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism" (p. 192). Televangelist Pat Robertson has said, "The Constitution of the United States. . . is a marvelous document for self-government by Christian people. But the minute you turn the document into the hands of non-Christian and atheistic people they can use it to destroy the very foundation of our society" (p. 201). I believe, however, that the Christian tradition contains the means to overcome these calls to Christian nationalism.

The Non-Coercive Past

What first needs to be recognized is that the nature of the church's relationship toward coercive state power changed after Constantine. John Howard Yoder (1984) writes, "In the New Testament 'mammon' and 'the sword' were clearly identified and renounced by the teachings and example of Jesus and the apostles. The church after Constantine reversed the New Testament attitude toward these matters and thereby changed the very nature of what it means to be church" (p. 107). Martin Marty (2007) writes, "When [the church] came to power in the fourth century. . . they turned from being persecutee to becoming persecutors, insisting under papacy or patriarchy and imperial power that there had to be homogeneity, usually enforced by the sword, among subjects" (p. 21-22). Stanley Hauerwas (2013) calls this change "Constantinianism" and describes it as the way "in which Christians sought to determine the cultural life and political life of the worlds in which they found themselves" (p. 82).

What is Required

What is required, and what I believe is the only path toward civil peace with the LGBTQ community, is for conservative Christians in the United States to recognize the Constantinian turn in the church's history and to adhere to the New Testament's vision for Christian involvement in civil society. This will involve a divestment of cultural hegemony. This can be done if conservative Christians take seriously the idea that they are "aliens and exiles" in this world, as 1 Peter 2:11 indicates (New Revised Standard Version). As Hauerwas (1983) notes, "For as Christians we are at home in no nation. Our true home is the church itself" (p. 102). This is not "a formula for a withdrawal ethic;" rather, "[t]he gospel is a political gospel. Christians are engaged in politics, but it is a politics of the kingdom that reveals the insufficiency of all politics based on coercion and falsehood and finds the true source of power in servanthood rather than dominion" (p. 102). For the conservative Christian, the adoption of such a politics can provide, according to Yoder (1984), an "alternative to idolatrous patriotism" and "the neo-Constantinian fusion of church and national power" and open the way for "a more honest dialogue between the community of faith and her neighbors [which] can build a more open pattern of civility" (p. 180).

Conclusion

Despite being irreconcilably different, conservative Christian groups and the LGBTQ community can co-exist peacefully together. Both groups must address the permanence of the other's presence in society, and both should seek the protection of the other's rights even in the face of disagreement over deeply held values. What is required is not agreement but understanding. The LGBTQ community must not

require conservative Christians to alter their views regarding human sexuality, and conservative Christians must share public space with all of their neighbors. Furthermore, conservative Christians, taking their own tradition seriously, must avoid seeking cultural hegemony through coercive attempts to block the rights of the LGBTQ community in the public square. Only by turning the cheek can there be peace.

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