

Society's Menace: Anti-Gay Violence and the Christian Right

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"The acceptance of homosexuality is the last step in the decline of Gentile civilization" (Robertson in Fetner 64). This statement by Pat Robertson, a Republican politician and presidential candidate in the late 1990s, reflects the views of many Christian fundamentalists – those who believe in interpreting scripture strictly. To them, homosexuals face the same sinful fate as murderers, adulterers, and rapists, which provides ample reason to exclude homosexuals from their congregations and to believe that homosexuals face a fiery damnation after death. For some, this is enough; the trouble arises when it's not. The modern era of mass media and the push for LGBTQ equality has increased the visibility of homosexuality in daily life, prompting a subsequent pushback from fundamentalists. Christian orthodoxy spread from the church to the home, from the congregation to Congress, and from the Bible to secular law. Religion became the front line in the fight against LGBTQ rights and in the rise of anti-gay violence; in fact, it has held its ground for so many years that it is easy to point a finger at Christianity and claim that religious bigotry is the splinter in LGBTQ activists' heels.

But the struggle surrounding anti-gay violence and LGBTQ rights isn't quite so black and white. As religious opposition to homosexuality spread to the political and legal levels, spurring the creation

of the Christian Right—a political faction seeking to implement socially conservative policies rooted in fundamentalism—the motivations for anti-gay violence altered subtly. While local anti-gay pushback remained rooted in God's supposed condemnation of homosexuality, political Christian leaders became increasingly concerned with, as Robertson put it, "the decline of Gentile civilization" (qtd. in Fetner 64). Social anthropologist Mary Douglas's theory of pollution fear, which asserts that certain groups may "pollute" society simply by challenging tradition, illuminates the reasoning behind this concern and explains how political homophobia emerges from the testing of societal boundaries (Douglas 4). These pollution fears drive the argument that LGBTQ people threaten traditional society, providing the Christian Right enough political and public support to enact its anti-gay agenda using local, state, and national legislation.

To understand the emergence of the modern anti-gay political movement and the changing motivations for anti-gay violence, we must return to grassroots Christianity, localized homophobia, and subtle forms of anti-gay violence. Often, evangelical Christians cite Biblical scripture as the reason for their discomfort with homosexuality. I use the word "discomfort" deliberately, because traditionally defined "homophobia" – or the fear of homosexuals – isn't really *fear*, nor hatred, particularly among everyday Christians. Rather, homophobia manifests as a rejection of the homosexual lifestyle based on a belief in homosexuality's inherent sins; rarely does this belief spur an intense hatred or fear of homosexuals (Sullivan-Blum 51). Yet that does not negate the threat such feelings pose toward LGBTQ people, nor does it imply

that violence against LGBTQ people cannot occur without intense hatred. “Violence,” traditionally defined, brings to mind bodily harm, acts of mental and physical terror, and other horrifying occurrences. However, the most prevalent form of violence against LGBTQ people on the local and political levels takes on a subtler form: the implication that, as a homosexual, you do not deserve the right to exist.

The motivations for parental backlash against LGBTQ children “coming out” with their identities demonstrate that this kind of indirect violence within communities still originates from scripture, despite the changes occurring to political religion’s anti-gay sentiments. In a 1996 public hearing conducted by the San Francisco Human Rights Commission on LGBTQ youth, Amy Paul, a lesbian, testified with 23 other LGBTQ youth on the violence and homophobia that they face in their homes and communities. Paul outlined her Christian fundamentalist parents’ outrage to her coming out at age 19, recalling their threat that she “[could] choose that lifestyle or [she could] choose [her] family” (qtd. in Arriola 430). This “either-or” reaction deals a damaging blow to the mental health of LGBTQ adolescents by labeling an inherent part of themselves unacceptable to their families. Without emotional support from family or friends, adolescents can suffer from depression, anxiety, or suicidal tendencies. A 1993 study of 194 LGBTQ youths who had either come out to their families or were still hiding their sexual orientations found that 81 had attempted suicide due to the belief that their families had invalidated, or would invalidate, their existence (D’Augelli and Hershberger 422). From an early age, children who grow up in

Christian fundamentalist families learn of the sins of homosexuality. To recognize themselves as homosexuals, therefore, and to experience rejection of that identity by their loved ones can pose more of a threat to LGBTQ adolescents than physical violence (Arriola 440).

So how did the Christian Right’s new society-based motivations for anti-gay violence emerge from this localized, Biblical homophobia? After all, a Christian parent doesn’t care about how their homosexual child will affect society—they only care about keeping their family free from sin. To answer this question, I believe that we must fully understand Mary Douglas’s theory of pollution fear, articulated in her book *Purity and Danger*, in which she analyzes the relationship between the sacred and the idea that certain people or actions “pollute” society. She asserts that societies often use pollution as “analogies for expressing a general view of the social order,” and that when a group of people threatens that social order, they become the pollution (Douglas 4). As an example, Douglas mentions a bathroom that had been installed in a house’s back hallway by setting doors at either end of the hall. Although free of dirt and grime, the bathroom seemed “dirty” to her because, traditionally, bathrooms do not belong in hallways; therefore, the bathroom required reordering—even removal—to restore social order (Douglas 3).

A similar concept appears in modern anti-LGBTQ rhetoric. Texas Republican Ron Simmons, an active member of the Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, and a member of the Christian Right, proposed two bills, HB 46 and HB 50, in 2017 that would require transgender people to use bathrooms according to their biological sex.

He claimed that "for 170 years since [Texas has] been a state, bathroom usage was understood... male used male, female used female" (qtd. in Teeman). This idea that male bathrooms traditionally belong to those born male, and female bathrooms to those born female, exemplifies Douglas's theory of pollution precisely; there is nothing inherently "dirty" about transgender people occupying the same bathroom as other people, but the tension this produces against societal norms creates a sense of disorder that prompts pushback from the Christian Right.

When we continue to overlay modern anti-gay violence and political religion with Douglas's theory, the emergence of a Christian Right obsessed with protecting traditional society from the "dirty" influence of homosexuality doesn't seem far-fetched at all. The ideology of heterosexism, developed by Gregory Herek, an internationally recognized authority on heterosexual prejudice against LGBTQ people, helps explain the belief that homosexuality doesn't belong in Gentile civilization. He defines heterosexism as the denial and stigmatization of any non-heterosexual behavior or community, which closely relates to the beliefs of fundamentalist Christians and the Christian Right, since "traditional" society involves both heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family—a husband and wife with children (Herek 316). Evidence of this emphasis on a nuclear family can be found in the many organizations affiliated with the Christian Right, such as Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, whose primary goal is to preserve the sanctity of traditional families. Therefore, increasing LGBTQ visibility challenges heterosexism and sparks fear within the Christian

Right—not of homosexuals themselves, but of the disintegration of society as they know it *by* homosexuals. The transgender bathroom bill controversy provides an example of this fear in action; traditional, heterosexual society dictates which gender belongs in which bathroom based on a heterosexist construction of gender. The Christian Right perceives the increasing visibility of transgender people as threatening this tradition, evidenced by the creation of bills that would restrict bathroom use based on biological sex—a traditional definition of gender identity (Teeman). The fear of heterosexism's collapse ultimately escalates the rise of anti-gay violence to the political and legal landscape, where Christian politicians strive to maintain tradition.

Although the Christian Right's struggle to preserve heterosexist American society continues today, its origins date back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when progressive activists began to challenge heterosexism and subsequently prompted the emergence of the Christian Right. Republican politician Pat Robertson led two successive movements in the 1980s—the Freedom Council and the Christian Coalition—that sought to integrate the Christian Right and its heterosexist ideologies into the Republican Party locally and nationally. Robertson's movements succeeded in electing fundamentalist Christians into local Republican political positions, and although these candidates often lasted only one term, their fundamentalist policymaking spelled trouble for the LGBTQ community (Fetner 70-72).

Instances of such policymaking and its roots in pollution fear appear in the uproar surrounding the 1980s AIDS crisis involving homosexual men,

which was immediately seized by the Christian Right as evidence of “divine and just retribution for immoral homosexual behavior” (Rimmerman 133). According to American sociologist Sara Diamond, the fact that “homosexuals [could] now be blamed for the modern-day Plague” connected the LGBTQ community directly to pollution ideas (qtd. in Rimmerman 133). The AIDS crisis appeared to show that unsuspecting heterosexuals could, in fact, “catch” homosexuality’s disease, further infecting traditional society. Legislation such as Proposition 96, a successful 1988 California bill allowing emergency responders to test arrested people for HIV without consent, exemplified the Christian Right’s attempts to prevent the now-literal contagion analogous with the LGBTQ community from spreading and the subsequent limitation of LGBTQ peoples’ rights to privacy. By effectively harnessing the public’s fears of contracting AIDS, anti-gay legislation such as Proposition 96 disguised as anti-AIDS legislation allowed the Christian Right to further label LGBTQ people as a dangerous societal contagion (Rimmerman 133).

Such legislation ultimately reflected the Christian Right’s increasing concern that the LGBTQ community would pollute traditional society, gaining its support from citizens who believed that, as Baptist minister Reverend Jerry Falwell stated in a 1987 televised sermon, “AIDS [was] a lethal judgment of God on America for endorsing this vulgar, perverted, and reprobate lifestyle” (qtd. in Jonsen and Stryker 131). Although it may initially appear that belief in homosexuality’s sinfulness prompted this idea, further inspection of the language used to describe those infected with AIDS suggests otherwise. Paul Cameron, American psychologist and

former director of the Family Research Institute, claimed that AIDS began when gay men conducted “unsanitary” sexual practices and that “gay men brought AIDS on themselves and the rest of the world” (qtd. in Rimmerman 134). The use of the word “unsanitary” specifically implies that homosexuals are inherently dirty; Cameron suggests that this dirt would pollute not only the LGBTQ community but the rest of the world as well, threatening all of society. By connecting homosexuality and the spread of AIDS and implying that both were sources of filth, the Christian Right could convince the public that to fear AIDS was also to fear homosexuality, which allowed politicians to pass anti-gay legislation without public backlash.

In the midst of the AIDS crisis, the 1986 Supreme Court decision *Bowers v. Hardwick* provided another opportunity for the Christian Right to enact anti-gay legislation; this decision reflected both heterosexism and pollution fears. The case involved the arrest of Michael Hardwick, a gay man from Atlanta, Georgia, for violating a Georgia law stating that “a sexual act involving the sex organs of one person and the mouth or anus of another” was a felony (qtd. in Rimmerman 60). While LGBTQ activists hoped that this case would legitimize all sexual conduct and subsequently the right of privacy for LGBTQ people, the Court instead maintained that states had “the right to criminalize private sexual behavior between consenting adults” (Adam 135). In determining whether the Constitution’s due process clause protected LGBTQ sexual privacy, the Court identified two kinds of rights protected by due process, one kind being “rights that implicate liberties that are ‘deeply rooted in this nation’s history and tradition.’” The

Court decided that homosexuality did not fit within these rights, claiming that "proscriptions against [homosexuality] have ancient roots." Because heterosexism remained society's standard, the Court's decision reflected the fear that increased LGBTQ rights would destroy those "ancient roots" and disband traditional society (qtd. in Rimmerman 60). This fear allowed the restriction of LGBTQ liberties and increased anti-gay legislation. Additionally, when inspecting the justices' concurrences and dissents, three mention Judeo-Christian values; specifically, the concurrence from Chief Justice Burger asserts that "condemnation of those [homosexual] practices is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards" (qtd. in *Bowers v. Hardwick*). Although Chief Justice Burger was likely not associated with the Christian Right, and the Court is itself an impartial body, the influence of heterosexism is still present in this decision. Throughout the AIDS crisis, the Christian Right had been capitalizing on pollution fears within the public and the nation to effectively demonize homosexuality and promote heterosexism. The Court was not immune to this, and so the opinions of the judges—particularly the conservative ones, such as Chief Justice Burger—were influenced by the Christian Right's efforts to maintain heterosexism.

In addition to the influence of heterosexism on the Court's decision, the Christian Right's political response to the decision furthered the spread of anti-gay legislation. Despite the 2003 overturn of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, it has drastically affected the LGBTQ community, according to legal scholar Evan Gertsmann, who points out that federal courts "have held that *Bowers* precludes them from treating gays and lesbians as a suspect or qua-

si-suspect class" (qtd. in Rimmer 61). The Court's decision thus allowed federal courts to reject the LGBTQ community's status as a group historically subject to discrimination ("Equal Protection"), and therefore the LGBTQ community "[couldn't] receive enhanced judicial protection under the equal protection clause" of the Fourteenth Amendment (qtd. in Rimmerman 61). This left the LGBTQ community vulnerable to further legal discrimination, as if the Supreme Court had rolled out a red carpet for the Christian Right into every government building in the country—and, on top of it all, validated the Christian Right's argument that homosexuality would degrade the fabric of traditional American society.

In the wake of the AIDS crisis and *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the Christian Right continued to enact anti-gay policy, maintaining their local influence even as their national foothold strengthened. One example of such policymaking occurred in New York City in 1992, when a proposed school curriculum called "Children of the Rainbow," which included two LGBTQ texts, received significant pushback from conservative Christian politicians who ultimately got the curriculum banned (Fetner 72-73). The fear that this curriculum would compromise children's "morality" by exposing them to homosexuality exemplifies the effectiveness with which the Christian Right now wielded pollution fear as a tool to gain public support for anti-gay policy. To get the curriculum banned, Christian politicians fed off parents' fears that homosexuality would corrupt their children simply by association ("Children"). The Christian Right used similar tactics in countless other instances of anti-gay legislation, and they continue to do so today.

An article in *Christianity Today*, the leading American conservative Protestant publication, puts the importance of pollution fear in Christian politics into perspective by detailing the Christian Right's response to modern progressive policy that sought to challenge heterosexism and undo previous anti-gay legislation. In discussing the potential repeal of the infamous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which banned out-of-the-closet LGBTQ people from serving in the military, the magazine asserted that Christians must "deter...President [Obama] from a tragic decision [repealing the ban]" that would "[amount] to a political *validation* of an unnatural, unhealthy... filthy practice" (qtd. in Herman 56). Fear that the government would legitimize the "filthy practice" of homosexuality and allow the LGBTQ community to pollute not only the military, but also the government and its "traditional morals," further motivated the Christian Right to preserve the sanctity of the American government and, ultimately, American society.

My argument so far – that the Christian Right draws its motivations for anti-gay violence from the fear that homosexuality will "pollute" traditional society – likely faces some opposition. One particular fundamentalist counterargument claims that anti-gay legislation originates from a battle for authority. Kevin Tebedo, founder of Colorado for Family Values, articulated this perspective in his 1993 speech to the First Congressional Church in Colorado Springs regarding Colorado's Amendment 2, which prohibited LGBTQ people from claiming protected or minority status. Tebedo proclaimed that the controversy around Amendment 2 had nothing to do with homosexuality as a threat to society; rather, he questioned whether "[it

is] the authority of man, or...the authority of God" that takes "precedence in...society" (qtd. in Cobb 29). On the surface, this argument boils down the Christian Right's anti-gay motivations to a battle for authority: should a secular government have more say over morality than God himself? It could be said that *Bowers v. Hardwick* subscribed to this argument; the justices' assertions that Judeo-Christian values should govern law and society could be seen as support for this battle for authority. Likewise, certain instances of local violence appear to be motivated by this conflict of authority. Benjamin Williams, a man charged with the murder of a gay couple in their own bed in 1999, claimed that he simply "obey[ed] the laws of the Creator" and that "you obey the government of man until there is a conflict...then you obey a higher law" (qtd. in "Williams Admits"). By asserting the precedence of spiritual law over secular law in cases of anti-gay violence, it seems as if this violence does not result from pollution fears, but rather from an attempt to reinstate Biblical law.

However, this belief that religious authority should, in some cases, trump secular authority ultimately boils down to the impression that secular authority has not adequately protected American society from homosexuality's perceived taint. William Dannemeyer, a Republican Congressman in the 1990s with a history of anti-gay activism, warned in his book *Shadow of the Land* that "the United States...is surrendering to this growing army of revolutionaries [the gay movement] without firing a single shot" in the face of the gay movement's "attack on our civilization" (qtd. in Herman 64). The Christian Right clearly fears that the secular government has allowed homosexuality

to "attack" American civilization; *ergo*, the fight for increased spiritual authority emerges from pollution fears and the perceived danger of homosexuality to traditional American society.



Marchers carrying a banner during the 1979 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights

From its founding in the 1970s, through the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and the continued anti-gay legislation of the 1990s and 2000s, to the present day, the Christian Right's anti-gay agenda hasn't slowed. Fearing that homosexuality will eventually destroy traditional American society, the Christian Right continues to propose anti-gay legislation and support political anti-gay violence. Their efforts prevail even as pro-gay politicians strive to reverse anti-gay legislation and provide more protection and rights for the LGBTQ community. Groups such as Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council continue to gain traction among Republican lawmakers and influence Congressional decisions (Martin 361). With the Christian Right continuing to influence current policymaking, it is essential that we understand the societal and pollution-driven motivations behind the Christian Right's anti-gay agenda in order to fight anti-gay violence and protect the rights of the LGBTQ community, so that we all may truly "love thy neighbor" (*King James Version*, Romans 13.9).

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