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Message Framing Concerning Homosexuality:

A Comparison between Radical and Moderate Christian Anti-Gay Organizations

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In the decades since the 1969 Stonewall riots, the homosexual population of the United States has made tremendous strides in the political, legal, and cultural spheres, and has thus prompted the religious-right to mobilize in order to oppose the continual expansion and acceptance of homosexuality. Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and Exodus International are three such religious, conservative organizations which have been instrumental in the anti-gay counter social movement. However, as the actions of radically anti-gay organizations such as the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas have shown, the general population doesn't view overt homophobia as an accepted social stance.

As such, I would like to examine how more moderately anti-gay organizations, such as the ones listed above, frame themselves so as not to appear explicitly homophobic and thus retain their legitimacy in the eyes of mainstream society. I will not be arguing that these organizations are indeed supportive of homosexuality; but that they frame their message in such a way so as to not seem outwardly hateful of homosexuals. Identity politics is key to understanding the religious-right, and through an examination of the language utilized concerning issues of marriage, employment discrimination, and "ex-gay" conversion programs, it appears that these organizations try to avoid seeming overtly homophobic by 1) portraying themselves as defenders, rather than aggressors and 2) separating homosexuality from the actual identity of the individual.

Unlike the more moderate anti-gay groups, extremely far-right organizations such as the Westboro Baptist Church have absolutely no qualms about expressing a hate-filled and completely intolerant perception of homosexuality. Rev. Fred Phelps, the leader of the Westboro Baptist Church, cites biblical passages in order to construe homosexuals as "sodomites [who] are wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly (Gen. 13:13), are violent and doom nations (Gen. 19:1-25; Jgs.19), are abominable to God (Lev. 18:22), [and] are worthy of death for their vile, depraved, unnatural sex practices (Lev. 20:13)" (Westboro 2007: 1). Phelps's Church has gained national attention in recent years for staging protests at the funerals of military personnel killed overseas, claiming that "the soldiers' deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan are God's Punishment for the United States' tolerating

homosexuality” (Simmons 2007: 1). Accordingly, the Westboro Baptist Church has used identity politics as a main premise of its ideological stance. Participants understand themselves not only as those protesting homosexuality, but as messengers of a divine wrath.

The Westboro Baptist Church’s actions have raised the ire of nearly every segment of society. Christians nation-wide express disgust at Rev. Phelps’s message and are dismayed that “the rest of the country often confuses Phelps’s [message]...with mainstream Christian thought and politics” (Veenker 1999:88). Religious leaders all across the country have been quick to distance themselves from Phelps and his religious teachings which “are often so complex that many mainstream Christians find their reasoning hard to comprehend” (Veenker 1999:88). Besides alienating itself from mainstream Christian society, the Westboro Baptist Church has recently brought itself into serious financial and legal trouble as well. On November 1st, 2007 Albert Snyder won a US\$ 11 million law-suit against the church after its protest disrupted the funeral of his son who was killed while serving in Iraq (Simmons 2007:1). Even though the case is going through the appeals process, the church now faces serious bankruptcy issues that could severely hamper its protesting efforts.

While the Westboro Baptist Church’s extreme stances on homosexuality have brought it national media coverage, they have at the same time almost completely marginalized the organization. The general public simply can’t take such a radical group seriously, and rather sees the Westboro church as a sideshow more than anything else. As the Gay & Lesbian Review comments, “what keeps us coming back is the

increasingly convoluted logic...by which the Phelps family decides where it will pop up next” (BTW 2005: 8). The Westboro Baptist Church preachers its message of hatred towards homosexuality very seriously, but has and will remain largely ineffective because its overtly homophobic stance is seen as illegitimate in the eyes of mainstream society. Consequently, very few religious-right organizations identify with the Westboro Baptist Church. However, anti-gay sentiment is an ideological cornerstone for Christian-right groups such as Focus on the Family, the Family Research council and Exodus International. While their stances on homosexuality aren’t as severe, they are finding themselves in increasing danger of being perceived as just as bigoted as more radical groups. Accordingly, it is imperative that these more moderate religious-right organizations take special precautions in framing their stance regarding homosexuality so as not to appear outwardly bigoted.

The Christian-right as we know it today currently deals with many hot-button issues such as abortion, the death penalty, and national security. Homosexuality was added to their radar beginning in the 1970’s as “by the end of 1975, over two dozen cities and counties had adopted gay rights ordinances” (Fetner 2001: 414). However, the “changes were significant enough...to capture the attention of social conservatives who felt that American Traditionalism was threatened by activists in the lesbian and gay movement” (2001: 414). The Christian-right still holds ‘American Traditionalism’ as a cherished ideal, and has continually organized social movements regarding gay marriage,

employment discrimination, and ‘cures’ for homosexuality in order to uphold what they believe is a divinely sanctioned social order. Accordingly, many religious conservatives argue “that homosexuality and homosexuals disrupt the sexual and gender order supposedly established by what is often called natural law” (Fone 2000:5).

The notion of gay marriage stands as the largest contemporary topic concerning religious conservatives’ understanding of sexual and gender law. Many view the religious-right as actively trying to deny equal marriage rights to homosexuals, but conservative Christians have a very different way of framing the issue. In reading policy statements from Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, not once do such groups claim to be trying to *deny* marriage to homosexuals. Rather, they claim to be *defending* this sacred institution from being completely destroyed. The Family Research Council describes itself as an organization that “values human life and *upholds* the institutions of marriage and family” and further goes on to say that “[l]ife and love are inextricably linked and find their natural expression in the institutions of marriage and family” (2007a:1, emphasis added). As such, the Family Research Council seeks to frame itself as a valiant defender of a natural social order that must be kept intact for the sake of life, love, and families. Much along the same lines, Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family explains that his organization endeavors to uphold its motto of “Nurturing and Defending Families Worldwide” through “defending the family by working to *preserve* the institution of traditional marriage” (2007a:1, emphasis added). The notion of defending marriage, rather

than actively trying to deny it, remains consistent between the two organizations.

Not only do religious conservatives contend that gay-marriage would disrupt the natural social order, many further subscribe to the notion that “[i]f someone can receive handouts without working, the value of work is diminished. If homosexuality is affirmed along with heterosexuality, then the meaning of heterosexual marriage is diminished” (Ruthven 2004: 128). As such, they feel that by allowing homosexuals to marry, their own marriages will carry less social prestige. By choosing to portray themselves as defenders of a sacred understanding of marriage, these Christian-right groups attempt to evade being labeled as exceedingly homophobic because being a defender implies a lack of aggression and subsequently innocence. Accordingly, framing one’s message to state “We’re working to *protect* traditional marriage” has a very different implication, on the surface at least, than “We’re working to *deny* homosexuals the right to traditional marriage.”

In regards to marriage, Christian-right organizations seek to further cement their validity as defenders by portraying homosexuals as the true aggressors. As Dr. Dobson of Focus on the Family states “The [homosexual] effort to redefine the family, qualify for adoption, promote the homosexual lifestyle in schools, etc., are objectives with which I disagree” (2007b:1). By specifically using the words ‘redefine’, ‘qualify’, and ‘promote’ Dr. Dobson looks to put homosexuals on the offensive as agents trying to fundamentally change our America way of life. The Family Research Council further develops this line of reasoning by

stating “One core objection to homosexual adoption is that it is wrong to intentionally deprive children of either a mother or a father in order to advance the homosexual political agenda” (2007c:1). Once again, the words ‘intentionally deprive’ and ‘advance’ frame homosexuals as the aggressors, and thus the ones responsible for causing so much social controversy. Continually, Dr. Dobson claims that “many Christians also feel they have been victimized by society’s hostility to traditional religious views” (2007b:1) and as such, looks to frame the religious-right as the true minority victim of oppression. Subsequently, by portraying themselves as defenders, the religious right seeks to put the blame on the aggressive advance of the homosexual agenda, all the while trying to maintain their position as innocent protectors of threatened cultural icons.

Much like gay-marriage, employment discrimination is an area in which the Christian-right has also had to carefully craft its message. The United States House of Representatives is currently debating the “Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 2007” whose main purpose is “to provide a comprehensive Federal prohibition of employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation” (ENDA 2007:1). Essentially, this bill seeks to prevent businesses from firing or not hiring someone solely because of their sexual orientation. Both the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family oppose such measures, and once again invoke the ‘defender vs. aggressor’ rhetoric prevalent in their stance on gay marriage.

Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council states “ENDA would provide homosexual employees and job

seekers federal protection and require American employers to hire and promote homosexuals without consideration of the impact of their behavior or appearance upon the welfare of their business or clientele” (2007b:1). Once again, the issue is not being framed as one *denying* equal rights to homosexuals, but rather one seeking to *protect* businesses from being coerced into accepting aggressive homosexual policy. Dr. Dobson of Focus on the Family further comments “We have not supported, and will never support, legislation aimed at depriving [homosexuals] of their basic constitutional rights---rights they share with every citizen” (2007b:1). Once more, the implication is that homosexuals are trying to change the American social system as it relates to employment by seeking special rights that would give them an un-fair advantage. As such, the Christian-right doesn’t depict itself trying to prevent homosexuals from having equal access to employment, but rather focuses on defending the American business model from having to bend to what religious conservatives believe are special-interests. In essence, they claim to be *shielding* the welfare of the business from any negative influence *forced* homosexual employment would entail. By once again invoking the ‘defender vs. aggressor’ motif, these organizations seek to avoid being labeled as overtly homophobic because they claim to be protecting an established social model, not actually trying to take away rights from homosexuals.

The Christian right’s dealings with homosexuality extend beyond legislation regarding marriage and employment discrimination, however. Organizations such as Exodus

International are part of a phenomenon endorsed by the Christian-right commonly referred to as the “ex-gay” movement. The ex-gay movement “is an international network that claims gay men and lesbians can be ‘convened’ to heterosexuality through submission to Jesus Christ or through secular ‘reparative therapy’” (Kahn 2000:29). In short, these organizations try to ‘cure’ people of their homosexuality and turn them into healthy heterosexuals. In its official statement on homosexuality, Exodus International upholds “heterosexuality as God’s creative intent for humanity [and]...cites homosexual tendencies as one of the many disorders that beset fallen humanity.” Exodus then goes on to state that choosing “to resolve these tendencies through homosexual behavior, taking on a homosexual identity, and involvement in the homosexual lifestyle is considered destructive” (Exodus International 2007:1). The language utilized by Exodus helps to frame its message in a very particular manner. The specific phrases ‘homosexual tendencies’, ‘homosexual identity’ and ‘homosexual lifestyle’ seek to portray homosexuality not as an intrinsic characteristic to one’s identity, such as skin color, but to define it merely as a negative behavior that isn’t reflective of one’s inner-most being. As such, Exodus frames its message to appear as though it’s merely trying to cure society of a disease, and looks upon its homosexual clients not with contempt, but with compassion for their sufferings. Dr. Dobson of Focus on the Family, once again speaking on employment discrimination, crystallizes Exodus’s view on homosexuality, stating “We must be very careful before creating new ‘minorities’ based on *behavior* or *beliefs*—as opposed to those

have been discriminated against historically based on their race” (2007b:1, emphasis added). As such, by endeavoring to portray homosexuality as a solely external behavior, rather than an intrinsic trait like skin color, the Christian-right seeks to avoid appearing overtly homophobic by upholding the motto of “hate the sin, love the sinner.” As such, religious conservatives can claim to be directing their disdain toward an impersonal and abstract behavior, not actual people.

Whereas the participants in the Westboro Baptist Church utilize identity politics in order to define themselves as harbingers of an impending divine doom, more moderate Christian-right groups rather identify as divinely inspired protectors of a natural and cherished social order. They further go on to define homosexuals as people afflicted by an external condition that, unlike skin color, cannot be used as a legitimate means for claiming equal rights. As such, they endeavor to avoid being perceived as outwardly bigoted. Through such efforts, mainstream anti-gay groups like Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council and Exodus International have been able to garner significant amounts of political clout and social approval. Homophobia is becoming a less acceptable social stance in American society, and no one would ever accuse the religious-right of being accepting of homosexuality. Yet as the contrast between the Westboro Baptist Church and Focus on the Family demonstrates, message-framing tactics can mean the difference between social acceptance and marginalization.

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