

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT: RELIGION AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Douglas C. Haldeman, Ph.D.

These are days when our attention is turned to the subject of love, for a variety of reasons. Obviously, on the political agenda has been the question of who gets to love whom, whose relationships are legitimate, and whose are worthy of legal sanction and recognition. In the world of government, we have come to an astounding time in which the love of a family that is torn by a woman's chronic vegetative illness can be contravened by the intervention of congress when the motivation is one of religious belief – or of political expedience. In a religious context, we are told that God is love, although according to the scriptural interpretations of some, it is a love with limits. Love is a word that we use frequently, carelessly, and with multiple meanings – to inspire affection, to be sure – but also to persuade, and to manipulate.

Such is the current situation with the burgeoning anti-gay therapy industry exemplified by so-called "reparative therapy" conferences such as "Love Won Out". "Love Won Out", I wonder – over what? And according to whom? What did the conquerors gain, and what losses did the vanquished suffer? According to the conference's website, this discourse on the victory of "love" was offered by a coalition of religious anti-gay activists, mental health professionals working outside the limits of accepted practice in their respective disciplines, and suspect "ex-gay" testimonials that mislead the public – and the often fragile and confused individuals and families struggling to deal with a son or daughter's sexual orientation.

Conferences such as this are but one source of distorted information about sexual orientation and the normative life experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The world of ex-gay religious ministries is proliferating under the guidance

of pastoral counselors, mental health counselors, and just those who may not be adequately trained, but are interested in delving into the complex landscape of a frightened, guilt-ridden individual's sexual orientation. There are many options for those interested in the subject of so-called "reparative therapy", or as it is referred to in a professional context, sexual orientation conversion therapy. The latter designation is, of course, more cumbersome, but is a more accurate reflection of the attempted activities in question. To let "reparative" therapy stand unchallenged as a title, to say nothing of the psychological legitimacy of these often questionable and harmful treatments, is to buy into the notion that, in terms of sexual orientation, there is something to be "repaired".

When I started writing articles critical of conversion therapy, both from a methodological and clinical standpoint, I never dreamed that 25 years later I would still be talking about it in public. In terms of requests for talks and interviews with the media, this is a time where interest has never been higher. So at this time, I think it is important to return to the two questions I posed earlier: what do the so-called "victors" in this love war gain? What's in it for them? And what are the consequences for the losers in the "love war"?

The Conversion therapy industry has evolved to become an interesting coalition of – dare I say? – strange bedfellows. The mental health professionals involved cling to outdated, discredited and unproven theories that other than heterosexual orientation is the result of abnormal attachment development. The religious proponents of the "ex-gay" ministries use a particular interpretation of scriptural text to devalue homosexuality. Both join together to claim that homosexuality is abnormal and treatable – through therapy, prayer, or any number of hetero-persuasive activities – buttressed by the testimonials of the "cured", whose testimony becomes even less credible when you consider the enormous social pressure they are under.

The claims of homosexual pathology and cure have nothing to do with social science, of course, which is firmly on the side of homosexuality as a normal variant of the human experience. It has long been accepted as scientifically-based fact that questioning youth thrive when they are free to explore their developing psychosexual selves without interference from family, society or church. It has long been accepted as scientifically-based fact that individuals do better socially and psychologically after they are able to acknowledge their sexual orientation, as opposed to running from it. It has long been accepted as scientifically based fact that the intrusion of socially and religiously mediated prejudice causes stigma that can be internalized and diminish the gay, lesbian or bisexual individual's sense of stability and well-being – and cause them to seek any number of remedies, including fraudulent conversion therapies. Organized psychology, psychiatry, counseling, social work and even the conservative American Medical Association's policies espouse these views. I have a lifelong respect for the deep and invaluable place that religious identity and expression have in the lives of many people, straight or gay. But I say to you that we cannot allow social science to be compromised by religious doctrine when it is contrary to the established and accepted scientific knowledge that serves as the basis for our policies.

There is growing evidence to suggest that there is a genetic basis for homosexual orientation, although I have always felt that it is far more important to discover the basis and treatment for prejudice than it is to learn what "makes people gay". There has been some fear among the gay community to acknowledge that for some, sexual orientation can be complex and fluid over the lifespan: people may choose to identify, or not identify, differently at various points in their lives. Given the massive assault on gay civil rights mounted by the religious right since the eighties, there have been some grounds to be afraid that if the word "choice" is connected in any LGBT orientation, our rights are jeopardized. However, we also

need to remember that we protect the civil rights of individuals choosing many things in life – including religion.

The value I see in the current campaign of misinformation for the proponents of conversion therapy, besides being a tremendous fund-raising tool, is two-fold: first, it reinforces, in the context of a public relations blitz, the simple notion that there is something wrong with being gay. This is important if they are to cleave to a scriptural or diagnostic devaluing of homosexuality. Because if gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are not flawed, or sick, then those religious proponents must acknowledge that they were created as they are by God. "God doesn't make mistakes", one patient quoted me after coming out and joining a local affirming and welcoming congregation.

Were the religious opponents of homosexuality to acknowledge that LGBT people are God's creation, they would have to drop their opposition to gay rights and gay marriage, and desist in their vile rhetoric about gay families bringing about the destruction of the heterosexual nuclear family. I have been partnered for 26 years with a wonderful man I'd marry if I could. In all those years, with hundreds of heterosexual friends, neighbors, colleagues, co-workers and acquaintances, I know of no one whose marriage collapsed because we were together. But were the anti-gay coalition to admit that we truly are all God's children, their theology *would* collapse, there would be no argument against gay family rights in the court of public opinion, and the ex-gay programs and mental health professionals would be out of lucrative jobs.

But moreover, some forms of conservative theologies require polarities in order to maintain their philosophical equilibrium. In order for the righteous to exist, there must be sinners; in order for one to see oneself as good, one must identify the evil-doers in the world. As LGBT people we are, at present, "it". In her thoughtful look at the cultural wars against gay people spearheaded by the Christian right,

entitled The Anti-Gay Agenda, Sociologist Didi Herman traces the evolution of the magazine *Christianity Today* through various decades and generational iterations of polarizing and stigmatizing “marginalized” groups; Roman Catholics, Jews, and people of color. It is no longer tolerated that the aforementioned groups serve as the target for their internal conflicts, so the gay community is the religious right’s chosen enemy. In order for us to serve in this role, we must be devalued; otherwise, how can we be – or represent – the enemy? And of course, their answer to the person struggling with integrating a Conservative religious background with her/his gayness or lesbianism? Don’t be one. We’ll show you how to be straight, or at least to be celibate.

The Minister in whose suburban Seattle church the “Love Won Out” conference was held complained to *The Seattle Times* that it was unfair for the local PFLAG group to be organizing this counter-conference. He wondered, what’s wrong with just letting people change? I would say that the potential harms are numerous.

First, there are the obvious emotional, psychological and social consequences for individuals who try very hard, but are unable to change their sexual orientation or adapt to a celibate life. A recent study suggests a strong correlation between religiosity, homonegativity, and a propensity to seek conversion therapy. I would agree with this finding, given 25 years of clinical experience working with individuals who have undergone some form of conversion therapy and/or participated in the ex-gay movement. There have been thousands of such individuals in my practice, and although they have experienced differential kinds of reactions, to a person they have been motivated by a religious terror that encompasses a variety of fears, including outright ostracization by their families and communities of faith. The failure to succeed in conversion therapy is for many, doubly stigmatizing, and sometimes results in depression and suicidality, intimacy avoidance and sexual dysfunction, a highly prejudiced and negatively distorted view of LGBT people and our community,

and a sense of “de-masculinization”, or failure to conform to the accepted norm of what a man “should be”. Sexual orientation and religious identification are both complex, deeply felt constructs that defy superficial or unproven treatments. The point should be to integrate them, not separate them. This is why I believe, unlike the proponents of conversion therapy, that no precious part of identity should be dishonored, remodeled, or expunged. This is why integration of disparate elements of identity, while therapeutically challenging, is a worthy goal.

The culture in which we live is also victimized by the misstatements of the ex-gay movement. The claim that LGBT people are mentally ill, or just plain “bad”, is intended to have consequences in public opinion and at the ballot box. At a time when social attitudes are shifting more toward supporting equal rights for LGB individuals than ever before, the public campaign to further stigmatize us is intentionally timed. The gay community itself also suffers as a result of the proponents of anti-gay therapies. The counter-phobic response to religious institutions of any kind is considerable. I have heard people say that they found it more difficult to come out as religiously identified to their gay friends than it was to come out as gay to their religiously-oriented families, many of whom are inclusive and accepting.

So we should remember that love is not about “winning”, oppressing, or devaluing. “Love” is about accepting and unifying. And I hope that the current wave of opposition we are experiencing on the religious and cultural front will enable us to do just that.