

Homophobia in the United States
The Case of Conservative Christians

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What links the American conservative Christian movement to homophobia? Anchoring his analysis in the texts published by the Christian organization Focus on the Family, Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey explores the discourse of contemporary Christian conservatism, distinguishing between political agenda and religious doctrine.

Reviewed: Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey, *Between a Man and a Woman: Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010

This short yet dense book (five chapters) accomplishes its purpose: to reveal the contemporary conservative Christian movement's discourse against same-sex marriage for what it is - a political agenda and not a religious doctrine. Drawing primarily from texts published and circulated by the well-known ministry organization for conservative Christians, Focus on the Family (FOF)¹, and juxtaposing them to the biblical writings they often rely upon, the author, Ludger Viefhues-Bailey, seeks not only to underline the lack of causality between both corpuses of writings, but to uncover the political and cultural mind-set the conservative Christian movement seeks to vehicle.

The fact that it was written by a theologian renders the demonstration all the more powerful. Co-chair of the philosophy of religion section of the American Academy of

1. The author justifies his choice to analyze FOF texts as uniquely representative of the conservative Christian movement - rather than, say, African American evangelical denominations, which have totally different political outlooks and socioeconomic backgrounds -for the following reasons: conservative Christians promote a religious and political revival of America and Christianity, speak of the inerrant truth of the Bible, and call for personal salvation and evangelism for all. For the author, Focus on the Family thus serves as the charismatic and mediatized vehicle for these visions.

Religion, Ludger Viefhues-Bailey obtained his PhD in Philosophy from Harvard University. Former associate professor for Methods and Theory in the Study of Religion at Yale University, he is currently Distinguished Professor for Philosophy, Gender, and Culture at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York. His work focuses on how discourses of religion and sexuality co-determine each other, and his methods involve integrating philosophical modes of analysis with those pertaining to gender and cultural studies.² He has now turned to the task of tracing how religious, sexual, and political normativities emerge in modern secular nation states; indeed, the central feature of this book.³

From the outset, Viefhues-Bailey's analysis stands apart from existing scholarly trends in the realm of religion and politics. Opposed to scholars such as Alan Wolfe who frame religious rhetoric as a mask for political ideology or to religious analysts and anthropologists who examine religious doctrine abstracted from political economy, the author, though seeking to reveal the political contours of anti- same-sex marriage discourse on the part of the religious right, insists on the mutually constitutive nature of the political and the religious. He even speaks, tongue in cheek, of the "ménage à trois of sexuality, religion, and politics" (73). His hypothesis - that the gender arrangements of 'traditional' heterosexual marriage reflect the political needs of the nation-state - leads him to connect conservative Christian values with middle-class American interests : "I argue that the conservative Christian claims in the current debates about marriage and same-sex unions have deep resonances in the self-understanding of the American polity... In particular, ideals of respectable masculinity and femininity are at stake... respectable Christian sexuality is intertwined with concerns for the formation and preservation of the American middle-class and its political interests" (67).

Conservatives' inconsistencies

Viefhues-Bailey first seeks to unveil inconsistencies in conservative Christian references to religious texts used to justify their condemnation of both homosexuality and same-sex marriage. He delves into numerous juxtapositions of biblical texts to FOF injunctions, a few of which are worth highlighting.

2. Resulting in his first book, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear. A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin, and Religion in Modern Skepticism* (Ashgate 2007).

3. His next book, forthcoming, is on the same topic and is entitled *No Separation. How Religion Makes the Secular Nation State*.

The first involves the subject of mixed-race marriages and an over-reliance by conservative Christians on certain biblical references. Throughout the 20th century, there had always been a broad consensus among Southern white Evangelical Christians that segregation was biblically founded and divinely mandated. To all belonging to that religious community, it was plain that God was a segregationist, and that what he had punished in Sodom was interracial marriage. According to this version, this simply meant that God's plan was for each race to live separately, and thus as a direct consequence, God was an advocate of segregation as it was practiced ever since the instauration of Jim Crow. Advocacy for this interpretation came from high-ranking Ministers such as Jerry Falwell, yet as support for segregation began to wane in the late 1960s early 1970s, this "vision" ceased being invoked. Indeed, by the 1980s, ministers such as Falwell began to publicly speak of "seeing the light", and of hearing "the small voice of God in their heart" calling for an end to the forced separation of black and white Americans.

Another false note in the use of biblical and theological texts by conservative Christians, and probably the most salient, has to do with their discussions on sex *per se*. Unsurprisingly, and according to FOF pamphlets and preaching, youth are taught that sex is for reproductive purposes only, and thus serves as the central reason for marriage. Viefhues-Bailey challenges head on references to certain biblical texts instrumentalized by the conservative Christian movement and reproduced by the FOF to justify its position, by showing how this insistence could also be interpreted to mean the acceptance of polygamy. Indeed, as the author demonstrates, an ongoing and intense historical debate among theologians throughout the history of Christianity has existed over sex in general, and individual sexual acts in particular. Contrary to endorsing marriage for procreative reasons, Augustine, for example, argued that though celibacy was the ideal Christian way of life, Christians should be encouraged to "enter the bonds of marriage if they needed to gratify their sexual desires". Further, for Augustine, procreation itself was "problematic because it is linked to the unredeemed order of nature before Christ." To that end, reproduction was thus not the goal of marriage but a means to make what was otherwise a sinful act (having sex) morally acceptable (69).

This approach will be rejected with the advent of the Reformation. Relying, among others, on the important work by Mark Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex: New Dimensions to*

*Religious Ethics*⁴, Viefhues-Bailey furthers his discussion on the selective nature of FOF's biblical and theological references by showing that "instead of a timeless consensus about what constitutes a Christian marriage, we rather find Christians... trying to make sense of the complexities of their scripture, desires, and histories" (70).

Saving the body politic

The most compelling portions of this book lie in Chapter 3 ("America and the State of Respectable Christian Romance" 61-95), especially the sub-chapters entitled "Protecting the Body Politic" and "Religion, Respectability, and the Great American Wedding". Drawing from previous works by Mark Jordan and Nancy Cott, Viefhues-Bailey masterfully works through the links and parallels between marriage as both a national and sacred endeavor. From the standpoint of the nation-state, the construction of the modern romantic marriage serves many state purposes, not the least of which is the linking of potentially destabilizing "romance" - in which individuals pair off according to uncontrollable vectors of personal desire - and re-stabilizing "respectability", all in a manner that preserves national myths of liberty and freedom while assuring the perpetuation of a stable social order.

The author argues that this tension between the two - liberty of the individual on the one hand, and the need for stability within the nation-state on the other - is likewise central to Christian "submission" to God wherein normative identity, particularly masculine identity, is located between the need to play the dominant role in the family while still submitting gracefully to God. Indeed, Viefhues-Bailey aptly argues that the vilification of gay men as predators, pedophiles, and sex addicts serves to maintain Protestant gender and sexual ideals as epitomes of gentility, appropriateness, and social stability. Hence, for conservatives to sanction same-sex marriages would be to destabilize Christian heteronormativity as the ideal gender and sexual model for the "civilized" American nation.

Viefhues-Bailey thus posits that Protestant sexual norms contribute to situating America as an explicitly Christian country. Illustrative of this, the author argues that "Catholics have always esteemed celibacy, and Mormons have endorsed polygamy, American Protestants have overwhelmingly valorized monogamous heterosexual matrimony as the sexual ideal... U.S. officials were quick to believe that immigrants from groups they

4. Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

considered to be racially inferior (such as Jews and Asians) were incapable of forming the ‘true’ romantic bonds that were the hallmarks of Christian marriage” (74).

A normative American masculinity

Viefhues-Bailey's final arguments are thoroughly convincing and constitute a powerful critique, not only of FOF's homophobic discourse, but of the dominance of values promoted by middle-class American normativity. Indeed, with the figure of the all-American football hero (or any other sports hero for that matter), the author connects the icon of normative American masculinity with conservative Christians' discourse on the evils of homosexuality, especially among men. Even further, the author firmly links these figures of respectable middle-class masculinity to both middle-class America and the conservative Christian movement strategies for power. Indeed, “Focus's strategy of defining normative American masculinity by rejecting ‘effeminized’ gay and by simultaneously containing allegedly natural and dangerous male aggression is not at all countercultural... it is deeply connected to middle-class visions of how to produce (white, respectable) masculine power”(140).

As such, the author extends Nancy Cott's groundbreaking work on marriage and the nation-state. Far from being inspired by religious texts or documented by historical inquiry, the conservative Christians' platform relative to homosexuality and same-sex marriage rather relies on political strategies that recycle ingrained stereotypes. Even further, and as the author's demonstration from start to finish reveals, the conservative Christians' discourse on homosexuality and same-sex marriage contributes to the very survival of the American nation-state, and as such fits in perfectly with the interests of the US federal government and most state governments which have by law defined marriage as being between a man and a woman.⁵

That being said, this book contains a few dubious passages, probably the most critical being a relatively weak section on women and lesbians. Analysis of the double-bind facing conservative Christian boys and men who, as the author demonstrates, must assert themselves as heads of households yet submit themselves to God (sub-chapter “Between Scylla and

5. Among the fifty states, nine prohibit same-sex marriage by statute, and thirty prohibit it in their constitution; six states allow same-sex marriage; two states recognize same-sex marriages performed only in other jurisdictions; laws that would legalize same-sex marriage in Washington and Maryland were passed in 2012, but each will be subject to a referendum during the November 2012 elections; Maine will also vote in November on an initiative to establish same-sex marriage.

Charybdis”, 108-109) is understandable, though not entirely convincing, especially when followed by a subsequent section (“Submission and the Crisis of Christian Womanhood”, 110-112), which basically argues the same double-bind existence, leaving the reader unclear as to the distinction the author seeks to make between normative behavior required of men and women.

Meanwhile, some questionable points of comparative analysis should also be underlined. The reader found difficulty in grasping the purpose of highlighting the fusion of religion and nationalism in Sri Lanka, and was likewise intrigued by the lack of reference to bridges established between the author's developments and those of post-structuralists such as, say, Judith Butler. Viefhues-Bailey does speak at one point of “surprising resonances” with Judith Butler, and the more theoretically inclined readers might deplore this “surprise” seeing that his methods and conclusions are quite congruent with what Butler has produced (128).

Apart from these shortcomings, Viefhues-Bailey's book participates in a reserved yet powerful undermining of homophobia in general and FOF's absurd stereotypes in particular. The author contends that “new exegetical tools” for biblical texts cannot, alone, undermine homophobia (40); what ultimately can are new reading practices brought on by social and cultural change. Though Viefhues-Bailey's book is not a blueprint for social change, it is an active element thereof.

Published in booksandideas.net, November 5th 2012.

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