

Nova Law Review

Volume 32, Issue 3

2008

Article 6

A Public Lecture: Why Religion Matters in the Civil Rights Debate for Gays and Lesbians

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A PUBLIC LECTURE: WHY RELIGION MATTERS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS DEBATE FOR GAYS AND LESBIANS

V. GENE ROBINSON*

What an honor it is to be named a Leo Goodwin Distinguished Visiting Professor and to be invited to address you this evening! I'd feel a little more confident if the word "distinguished" were added by you *following* my lecture and based on its merits, rather than being attached right up front—but there it is. You have already been addressed by some wonderful—and distinguished—authorities and activists in this movement for full civil rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. I am honored to be included among them and hope to be able to add some small contribution to their reflections on this issue facing American culture.

Let me set out some questions I hope to answer in this time with you: Why are we here in this particular moment, struggling with this particular issue? Why does religion play such a central role in this debate, and is that an appropriate role in public discourse? Who are the loudest, strongest voices coming from the religious community, and why are they so strident, unrelenting and passionate? What does the Bible really say about homosexuality, what does it NOT say, and why does it matter in a secular State? What IS the rightful role of religion in public discourse in a secular State? How does this debate about the civil rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) people relate to the other "isms" of our culture, and what is the broader context for discussion of human rights for all our citizens? How do we move forward in the never-ending search for the common good? As I contemplate trying to accomplish all this in the allotted time, as well as leave time for some questions, I'm glad that I'll be here for several days for some follow up with you!

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Permit me to own up to the biases and limitations I bring to this task. Let's just note for the record that I am male. I will never know what it is like to live my life as a female, and if this were a lesbian delivering this lecture, that would be wholly authoritative perspective different from mine. I am a white man. The experience of being gay in a community of color is different than mine, especially in the fact that these people have experienced a double discrimination I can but only imagine. I grew up in a family that was poor, uneducated, and deeply religious, in rural, largely segregated Kentucky, where we were tobacco tenant farmers, living without running water and central heat, but rather unaware of how poor we were. All of that colors who I was, who I came to be, and how I understand my own story. And believe me, not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine a world in which we would be talking openly about homosexuality, nor a debate in which often I would reluctantly find myself at the center.

I am a Christian. The fact that I am tempted to add "but not that kind of Christian" speaks to the powerful role the conservative Religious Right has come to play in this country and in this debate—but more about that later. While I believe Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah, the Christ, long hoped for by the Jews, and for Christians fulfilled in this itinerant preacher and reformer, I do not believe that Jesus is the sole revelation of God's self to the world. Such a God, capable or willing to reveal God's self in only one way, seems like a God too small to be worthy of worship. And so, despite the fact that I believe Jesus to be God's perfect revelation of God's self, I respect and revere all those who have come to know God through other faith journeys. I can only speak out of my own context as a Christian, and I will trust you to make the connections and translations into the understandings of your own faith communities, as well as those of you who hold no particularly religious beliefs at all. After all, the challenge before us as citizens of this country is to define our rights and responsibilities to one another no matter what our faith beliefs are.

Finally, let me own up to the fact that I am not a scholar, and while I may talk for much too long a time, I will not be thinking of this as a lecture. A lecture implies that I know something that you don't know, and if you just sit there, quietly absorbing all that I have to say, at the end the knowledge in my brain will have been transferred into yours, for good or ill. Rather, I would merely like to think out loud in your presence, in the hopes that something I say might assist you in your own thinking about these issues.

Why are we here in this particular moment in the history of this country and in the struggle for human rights? Thirty years ago, as the title of this series suggests, we were in a different moment. Anita Bryant was the poster

child and spokesperson for a movement to squelch any forward movement in the fuller inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the citizenry.¹ And while we may now look back on her and the views she represented as being outdated, course and even a bit quaint, let's not forget that thirty years ago, those views had a huge following and were racking up huge victories against those who would more widely accept the participation of gay and lesbian people in the benefits of citizenship.²

Thirty years ago, even twenty years ago, most Americans would have told you—honestly—that they did not know any gay or lesbian people. If pushed, they might admit that there was weird Uncle Harry, a lifelong bachelor whom everyone knew to be a bit different, or those two spinster ladies who have lived together down the street for as long as anyone remembers. But did they know any out, proud and self-affirming gay and lesbian people? No, probably not.

Fast forward to today, and is there ANYONE left who doesn't know some family member, co-worker, or neighbor who is gay? The reason, of course, is that the last two decades have seen the unprecedented movement by gay and lesbian people to make themselves known—AS gay and lesbian—to their families, co-workers and friends.³ This has, of course, proceeded at differing rates based on geography, demographics, and culture. Certain regions of the country seem more accepting than others; metropolitan areas, to which many gay and lesbian people have gravitated because of both anonymity and generally more liberal attitudes, were the vanguard of such public admissions of sexual orientation; and more secular, less religious, settings have provided more open and accepting environments for coming out.⁴ But the REAL shift in the culture has been the quiet, largely private admissions by sons and daughters, cousins, and aunts and uncles, in families from Birmingham to Boise, that “yes, I too am gay.”

Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to serve as Supervisor of the San Francisco City Council—and who was assassinated in 1978 by an anti-gay colleague on the Council—once said that “coming out is the most political

1. See Tina Fetner, *Working Anita Bryant: The Impact of Christian Anti-Gay Activism on Lesbian and Gay Movement Claims*, 48 SOC. PROBS. 411, 411, 414–15 (2001).

2. See *id.* at 415.

3. See Evan Wolfson, *Book Review: Ian Ayers & Jennifer Gerarda Brown, Straightforward: How to Mobilize Heterosexual Support for Gay Rights*, 12 WM. & MARY J. WOMEN & L. 733, 733 (2005–06).

4. Gaiutra Bahadur & Andy Alford, *A New Haven for Gay Couples: The Suburbs Census Shows Lesbians Lead Exodus from Cities to Newly Accepting Areas*, AUSTIN AM. STATESMAN, Aug. 22, 2001, at A1.

thing you can do.”⁵ He was right, and I believe it was the countless dramas, one at a time, of gay and lesbian people courageously sharing who they really were at their core with those they loved or worked with, which has literally changed the world and brought us to this moment.

The change that we see occurring is happening in the same way change always happens. One has a world view that seems to work pretty well at interpreting reality. Then something happens to us that doesn't fit into that world view—indeed, something for which our old world view is insufficient to explain. We are thrown into a bit of chaos and confusion, when it seems like nothing is certain anymore. And then our old world view is reshaped in such a way as to accommodate this new truth.

That's the way it happens for families of gay and lesbian people. A parent believes the traditional view that homosexuals are immoral, sick, disordered, and misguided in their choices. Then a beloved child comes and says, “Mom, Dad, I'm gay.” Now the parent is plunged into the chaos of knowing their beloved child, and knowing that he or she is NOT immoral, sick or misguided, and yet they've always been told this about homosexuals. Then, over time, they come to understand that their child is the same child he or she has always been, only now happier and healthier. The child who never seemed able to maintain a relationship is now hopelessly in love. The old world view about homosexuality undergoes an overhaul and is changed to incorporate a new understanding of sexuality that allows them to continue loving their child. They may not be out there beating the drum for marriage equality—although many of them are—and they may not be bragging to all their friends about their son's new boyfriend, but something deep and important has changed, some significant piece of ground has shifted, and the world is never again the same as it was. THAT is happening all over America as we speak.

There is not a single nation, culture, or religion that is not dealing with the issue of homosexuality.⁶ Even those religions which are absolutely clear and unswerving in their condemnation of homosexuality are being challenged by their gay and lesbian members to take another look at that condemnation.⁷ Some estimate the percentage of Roman Catholic priests who are gay to be between forty and sixty percent.⁸ The Southern Baptist Con-

5. Serena Nanda, *Getting Away with Murder: Cultural Diversity and the Criminal Justice System*, 5 J. CRIM. JUST. EDUC. 117, 117 (1994).

6. See George W. Dent, Jr., *Civil Rights for Whom?: Gay Rights Versus Religious Freedom*, 95 KY. L.J. 533 (2007).

7. See *id.* at 555.

8. *U.S. Research Survey: Younger Priests Are Generally More Orthodox*, AD2000, Aug. 2003, available at http://www.ad2000.com.au/articles/2002/aug2003p7_1404.html.

vention, which values congregational autonomy as almost sacred, has expelled some congregations for offering blessings to same sex couples or calling a gay minister.⁹ Conservative Jews have finally admitted gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rabbinical students to their seminaries.¹⁰ Evangelical Christians have been rocked by revelations that some of their leaders have had secret affairs with people of the same sex.¹¹

Who would have thought any of us would live long enough to see legal civil unions and even marriage for gay and lesbian couples? Who would have thought that a country like South Africa would write gay and lesbian civil rights explicitly into their constitution,¹² or that a Catholic country like Spain would permit marriage to same sex couples?¹³ Many Anglicans from around the world continue to call on me to resign my position as bishop, naively believing that if I went away, this issue would go away, and the Church would return to its quiet, peaceful existence—a peaceful existence, which, by the way, the Church has never enjoyed. In fact, this is an issue that is not going to go away, even for those who most oppose it.¹⁴ Simply put, this toothpaste is not going back into the tube!

Why does religion play such an important role in this debate? Religion, of course, has always played a role in the debates and public discourse of nations—and certainly so here in the United States, which is probably the most religiously fervent of all the Western nations.¹⁵ But why the particularly virulent and passionate stances on this issue? And why can't we simply ignore the religious argument in this secular debate?

Religion makes its beliefs known on a variety of issues—from abortion to stem cell research, from environmental stewardship to capital punishment. But most religious faith communities have people on BOTH sides of these issues within their ranks—at least in part because these positions can only be extrapolated from sacred texts.¹⁶ There is no seemingly overt “adherence to” or “proscription against” to be found in scripture for these issues. One can

9. Keith Hartman, *Congregation in Conflict: The Battle Over Homosexuality*, 47–48 (Rutgers Univ. Press 1996).

10. Neela Banerjee, *Conservative Jewish Seminary Will Accept Gay Students*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 27, 2007, at A14.

11. *Board Forces Evangelical Leader Out of Church*, BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE, Nov. 5, 2006, at A11.

12. S. AFR. CONST. 1996 § 9(3).

13. Jennifer Green, *Spain Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage*, WASH. POST, July 1, 2005, at A14.

14. Mike Hudson, *The Future of Gay*, THE ADVOC., June 22, 2004, at 59.

15. Martin E. Marty, *Pluralisms*, 612 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. R. SOC. SCI., 253, 254 (2007).

16. *Id.*

read Genesis 1:28, for instance—“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”—and argue for good environmental stewardship OR total exploitation of the environment using the same verse, but interpreting it differently, depending on the meanings of the words “subdue” and “dominion!”¹⁷ Abortion can be defended on the basis of our God-given personal conscience or opposed on the basis of the sanctity of life.

But unlike these other moral questions, the issue of homosexuality at least seems to be explicitly condemned. At first reading, Leviticus seems to condemn quite specifically male homosexuality: “You [men] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination;” and “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.”¹⁸ The absence of same sex proscriptions for women in these texts is a subject for later discussion. The fact that the Bible seems specifically to name homosexuality as repugnant to God and worthy of capital punishment makes religion particularly relevant to our discussion of this issue, in ways that are more compelling than with other hot button issues.

This Biblical proscription also has an effect on gay and lesbian people. I was once present for a discussion among a group of gay and lesbian teenagers discussing their sexual orientation. Not one of them had grown up in a religiously observant household; not one of them would have particularly identified themselves as religious Jews or Christians. But every single one of them thought they knew what God thought of them, and they all knew the word “abomination.” Now these kids could not have found the Book of Leviticus in the Bible if their lives had depended on it, yet each was confident that God condemned them for their sexual orientation. The fact is, at least in American and Western culture, God’s condemnation of homosexuality is assumed. It’s in the air we breathe. And because of that, religious belief IS relevant in our discussion of how to achieve civil rights for gay and lesbian people.

Let’s be honest. The vast majority of the discrimination experienced by gay and lesbian people has come at the hands of religious people, and the greatest single hindrance to the achievement of full civil rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people can be laid at the doorstep of the three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. And it is going to take religious voices and religious people to undo the harm, devastation and discrimination wrought at the hands of religious people.

17. *Genesis* 1:28 (New Revised Standard Version [hereinafter NRSV]).

18. *Leviticus* 18:22 (NRSV); *Leviticus* 20:13 (NRSV)

So, what does the Bible really say about homosexuality? This is a topic which could and should be the subject of a lengthy lecture, all on its own, and I am happy to address it more fully in the subsequent time we have together. But let me at least make several points about why I believe our traditional understanding of the Biblical—and hence God’s—attitude toward homosexuals is flawed and in need of reinterpretation.

First, the philosophical and psychological construct of sexual orientation is a modern phenomenon.¹⁹ It was only at the very end of the nineteenth century that the notion was first posed that there might be a certain minority of us who are naturally-oriented, affectionally and sexually, toward members of the same gender.²⁰ In Biblical times, and until the last 100+ years, it has been assumed that everyone is heterosexual.²¹ And therefore, any who acted in a homosexual manner were acting “against their nature.”²² In other words, homosexuals were “heterosexuals behaving badly.”²³ Indeed, many recent evangelical translations of the Bible use the word “homosexual” to translate certain Greek and Hebrew words which are actually somewhat obscure and puzzling as to their meaning, and most likely related to sexual exploitation and abuse of underage boys, quite common in Roman and Greek culture, and to temple prostitution in neighboring heathen cultures, rather than to homosexuality *per se*.²⁴ Yet, reading one of these translations using the word “homosexual,” one would assume that the ancient Hebrew and Christian communities were talking about precisely the same thing we are talking about today. Such is not the case. One cannot take a twentieth century word, insert it back into an ancient text and proclaim that it means precisely something that was totally unknown to the authors of that text.

Second, our understanding of the word “abomination” is different from its original use. According to the Holiness Code of Leviticus, many things were an “abomination” to God, including the eating of pork.²⁵ That was not to say that eating pork was innately wrong, but that it was to be one of the

19. *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558, 568 (2003).

20. Brent Pickett, *Homosexuality*, in STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (Nov. 29, 2006), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/homosexuality/>.

21. B.A. Robinson, *The Bible and Homosexuality: An Introduction*, ONTARIO CONSULTANTS ON RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE (Dec. 19, 2006), http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibi.htm.

22. Andy Mapstone, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, COURAGE (Dec. 2003), <http://www.courage.org.uk/articles/Bible.shtml>.

23. QUEST, QUEST CONFERENCE 2001: A REPORT (2001), <http://www.questgaycatholic.org.uk/conferences/conf2001report.asp>.

24. See *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Robin Scroggs, Fortress Press, 1983.

25. The Holiness Codes are contained mostly in *Leviticus* 11–16 and 17–26. The prohibition of pork as being unclean is found at *Leviticus* 11:7.

ways Jews were constantly reminded that they were different, a separate chosen people of God, and in so observing these dietary laws, would be reminded of this special relationship to God.²⁶ Likewise, they were not to eat shellfish, plant two kinds of seed in the same field, or wear two kinds of cloth simultaneously.²⁷ Tattoos were forbidden;²⁸ those who cursed their parents were to be put to death.²⁹ One does not hear leaders from the Religious Right upholding these “abominations” nor urging their compliance – yet these all occur within the same Holiness Code of Leviticus along with the proscriptions of men lying with men.³⁰ Even with the proscription against male same sex behavior, most fundamentalists stop short of demanding death as the penalty, as prescribed by Leviticus.³¹

Third, the science of reproduction and sexual activity of the ancient Hebrews was different from what we know today.³² Male sperm was thought to contain all of nascent life.³³ The only contribution made by women in the reproductive process was a place for the fetus to incubate.³⁴ A man’s sperm, or “seed,” contained everything necessary for human life, and therefore any “spilling” of male seed was tantamount to murder.³⁵ Ancient Hebrews were a small minority, living in a hostile heathen environment, struggling to reproduce and build its population for survival purposes.³⁶ Therefore any kind of waste of male sperm was antithetical to that survival and synonymous with murder – whether that be same sex activity, masturbation, or even *coitus interruptus* in heterosexual copulation (the so-called “sin of Onan”) – because it wasted male seed and squandered the possibility of new human life.³⁷ Today, we understand that both sexes contribute to the process of human reproduction and over-population, not under-population, is a problem. We believe sexuality to have purposes far beyond reproduction.³⁸ Yet, these few verses of scripture are quoted as if nothing has changed in our under-

26. Elijah L. Milne, *Protecting Islam’s Garden From the Wilderness: Halal Fraud Statutes and the First Amendment* 2 J. FOOD L. POL’Y 61 (2006).

27. *Leviticus* 19:19 (NRSV)

28. *Id.*

29. *Leviticus* 20:9 (NRSV)

30. *Leviticus* 18:22 (NRSV); *Leviticus* 20:13 (NRSV)

31. *Leviticus* 20:13 (NRSV)

32. Faith & Social Justice: In the Spirit of Richard Overton and the 17th C., <http://levellers.wordpress.com/category/hebrew-bible/>.

33. Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship, Homosexuality: Another Adventist Point of View, <http://www.sdakinship.org/anotherpov/05.htm> (last visited Apr. 10, 2008).

34. *See id.*

35. *See id.*

36. *See id.*

37. *Genesis* 38:9 (NRSV).

38. See the “Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage,” Book of Common Prayer

standing since Biblical times. Note, of course, that all the other references to the “spilling of seed” have been reinterpreted to be acceptable, but not the proscription against same sex behavior.

The study of hermeneutics, the methodologies by which we interpret a text, has yielded rich information about the culture in which these texts were written and heard. Much of the Biblical scholarship in the past fifty years has focused on the sociological cultures which formed the settings for these scriptural texts, both the cultures of the ancient Hebrews and the early Church, as well as the competing and often hostile cultures which surrounded them. We have come to know the meaning of these sacred texts because we have become so much more knowledgeable about the cultural situations to which they were responses. Conservative Christians often act as if none of this scholarship has occurred or makes any difference in a 21st century understanding of those texts.

But let me be clear, I believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God. But that is different than believing them to be the “words” of God, virtually dictated by God through human media. And let’s not forget that the real “Word” of God is Jesus himself! “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” begins the Gospel of John. The Jesus “event,” – his life, death and resurrection – is believed by Christians to be the perfect revelation of God, NOT the Bible. The Bible is perhaps the best and most trustworthy witness TO that event, but it neither replaces Jesus as the Word nor does it take precedence over Christ’s continuing action in the world through the Holy Spirit. To elevate the words of scripture to a place higher than the revealed Word of God in Jesus is an act of idolatry.

Indeed, Jesus says a very interesting thing to his disciples, on the night before he is betrayed. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”³⁹ It sounds to me as if Jesus is saying: “You are not ready to hear everything I have to teach you – things you cannot culturally comprehend right now. So I will send the Holy Spirit to guide you and teach you, over time, those things which you need to understand.” And as a Christian, I believe that the Holy Spirit has done just that.

Less than a century and a half ago, “good” Christian people were still using scripture to justify slavery.⁴⁰ In the 1950’s and 60’s “good” Christian

39. *John* 16:13 (NRSV)

40. The Bishop of Vermont, in 1864 – AFTER the Emancipation Proclamation – published a scripture-based defense of slavery.

people were enforcing Jim Crow laws and blocking entrances to their schools to black children.⁴¹ I believe that the Holy Spirit led us into a deeper truth, about the equality, worth and dignity of every human being, regardless of race. And the culture changed. Not enough, of course, because racism is alive and well among us in the culture and in the Church. But many of us learned.

It is almost inconceivable to me that the Episcopal Church first allowed women to be deputies to our national General Convention in 1970, and only began ordaining women to the priesthood 30 years ago.⁴² And yet, the largest Christian denomination in the world still does not open the ranks of the ordained to the women who form its core. Scripture passages from St. Paul about the inappropriateness of women holding leadership positions or making their voices heard in the Church are still being used to subjugate women all over the world. All in the name of God as revealed in scripture. But the Holy Spirit unrelentingly keeps teaching and guiding us to the full inclusion of all of God's children.

Indeed, those who believe that the 2,000-year tradition against homosexuality argues against change forget that the Church has changed its understanding of some very important teachings that it has held for countless centuries. For instance, the Church for nearly 2,000 years took seriously Jesus' words that remarriage after divorce was adultery.⁴³ Until the early days of my own ministry as a priest, divorced people were not welcome to take communion, and if one of them decided to become married to someone else, that second marriage could not be solemnized in an Episcopal Church. And then, two things happened. We perceived that we were denying communion to people at one of those times they most desperately needed it. And we noticed that these second marriages were turning out to be a blessing to the couple and to the community. Indeed, GOD seemed to be showing up in those marriages and relationships and families. And so, in spite of the explicit injunction against it from the mouth of Jesus himself, we began to offer the Church's blessing upon these marriages. I believe it was the work of the Holy Spirit, guiding us into the truth, just as Jesus promised the Spirit would.

All of this may seem hopelessly off-topic for issues related to gay and lesbian people, but I would assert that such is not the case. We are talking about how we change our minds – as a culture, a nation and a Church – about something we've been very sure about for thousands of years. To some, it

41. See generally *Brown v. Bd. of Educ. of Topeka, Kan.*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955); 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

42. *Episcopalians Elect First Woman to Head U.S. Church*, PBS NEWSHOUR, June 19, 2006, available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/jan-june06/episcopal_06-19.html.

43. *Matthew 5:32* (NRSV)

seems like the height of madness, and a willy-nilly discarding of ancient truths. To some, it seems as if nothing is certain anymore, or that the Church doesn't know what it believes. But to others of us, it seems like it's nothing to be fearful of, but rather merely the kind of change that the Holy Spirit is promised to inspire. Only through such a gentle and comforting understanding of the continuing work of God will people find the courage to change their minds about this issue.

Why is the resistance to this change so vehement, so vitriolic, so deep? In the nation, why would two people who want to pledge their love and fidelity to one another for their mutual benefit and the benefit of society be such an issue? Why wouldn't conservatives applaud the pledge of faithful monogamy in gay marriage for the people they have always accused of being promiscuous and irresponsible? Why wouldn't conservative Christians support the end to a gay person feeling like they have to enter a usually-disastrous heterosexual marriage in order to be happy and accepted? Why can the Republicans use gay marriage as such an effective wedge issue in political campaigns?

Or, in the Church, why would my election as bishop of a reasonably conservative, rural and small town diocese in New England become such a huge thing? How could such an event spawn thousands of hateful letters and emails? Why would I, a Christian elected by the clergy and people of a diocese to be their bishop, receive numerous death threats from other religious people, and have to wear a bulletproof vest for my own consecration as bishop? Why would people debate my fitness for such a calling, based not on my skills, experience and faithfulness, but solely on my sexual orientation – not just in metropolitan churches, but in a small theological school deep in the bush of Kenya and on the remotest of Pacific islands? Why would some leaders in the Anglican Communion consider it dangerous even to meet with me, talk with me or be seen with me?

Allow me to speculate about why I believe the upheaval has been so widespread and the resistance so great to the full acceptance of gay and lesbian people into the life of the nation, and in doing so, perhaps set this debate in a larger context. There's not enough time to explore each of these dynamics in depth, but let me file some notions by title, and we can discuss them later.

First, these are issues about sexuality – and we have never been very comfortable talking about such things. I'm not sure we were ever comfortable talking about sexual matters, but the Puritans in our own culture didn't help. We all were influenced by the Victorian Age with its often duplicitous sensibilities. While sexual escapades were rampantly going on behind the scenes and below the surface, all the talk was about chastity, fidelity and monogamy. It's no wonder we find these things hard to talk about. The re-

alities of our sexual lives are perhaps too frightening to bring to the light of day.

And yet, many of the moral issues that face us today involve sexuality. Abortion, fertility therapies, alternative methods of reproduction, the role of men and women, and the appalling crisis of the American family all involve sexuality. We need to be talking about these things, and yet we have little experience in doing so. Parents still falter over what to tell their children about sex and when to tell them. By the time most parents get around to it, their children are already knowledgeable about (and sometimes are participating in) practices the parents won't even get close to in their "birds and bees" speech. I'm not at all sure that our near-obsession with homosexuality isn't a group denial mechanism for heterosexuals not to talk about their own sexual issues. If we can talk about *them*, then we don't have to talk about *us*. If we can focus on *their* problems, then we don't have to talk about our own.

In addition, most people resist seeing the treatment of homosexuals as "their" problem. Gay and lesbian people have known for a long time that the problem here isn't gay and lesbian people's sexuality, but their ill treatment by a hostile society.

You may notice that I have not once used the word "homophobia." I think it exists in some people, but I find it to be a word that acts as a conversation stopper. Some will claim that they are not fearful of homosexuals and are therefore "not guilty" of homophobia. But aside from the hatred of homosexuals, which does exist, the further sin against which we need to speak and act, of which the secular society is guilty, is "heterosexism."

You know what an "ism" is: a set of prejudices and values and judgments backed up with the power to enforce those prejudices in society. Racism is not just fear and loathing of non-white people; it is the systemic network of laws, customs and beliefs that perpetuate prejudicial treatment of people of color. I benefit every day from being white in this culture. I don't have to hate anyone, don't have to call anyone a hateful name; never have to do any harm to a person of color to benefit from a racist society. I merely have to sit back and reap the rewards from a system set up to benefit me. I can be tolerant, open minded and multi-culturally sensitive. But as long as I am not working to dismantle that system, I am racist.

Similarly, sexism is not merely the denigration and devaluation of women; it is the myriad ways in which the system is set up to benefit men over women. It takes no hateful behavior on my part to reap the rewards given to men over women. But to choose not to work for the full equality of women in this culture is to be sexist.

So, the sin we are fighting in this country right now in the secular sphere is the sin of heterosexism. More and more people are feeling kindly toward gay and lesbian people—probably not the majority yet, but a growing

number. But that will never be enough. It will never be enough not to hate gay people (although that's a good beginning!). What is needed is the dismantling of the system which rewards heterosexuals at the expense of homosexuals. That is why equal marriage rights are so important. That's why "don't ask, don't tell" is such a failure and such a painful thing for gay and lesbian people, even those who have no desire to serve in the military. They are ever present reminders that our identities, our lives, our relationships are second class – because the very system of laws that govern us discriminates against us and denigrates our very lives. Over one thousand rights are automatically granted to a couple who marries. Britney Spears received those one thousand rights on the night she decided on a lark to get married in Las Vegas, yet the gay couple who has been faithfully together for 30 years has none of those rights.

This systemic heterosexism affects gay and lesbian people in countless ways, large and small. Because my partner's parents were not accepting of our relationship, we had to draw up documents which would prevent his parents from making all his medical decisions if he became sick and incompetent, or from taking his body away from me if he were to die. He and I just returned from overseas, and while every other family on the plane had to fill out just one immigration and customs form, we had to fill out two, as if we were strangers, or merely friends, as if the twenty years we've been together doesn't qualify as family. It's a little thing, but it's mightily symbolic of the way the system is set up to devalue us as people and as families. The problem here is not just homophobia, it is heterosexism.

Lastly, let me try to put this into an even larger context. I believe with my whole heart that what we are up against in this struggle is the beginning of the end of patriarchy. At their root, heterosexism and homophobia are expressions of misogyny, the hatred of women. The "sin" of a "man lying with a man" (remember Leviticus?) is in the next few words: "as with a woman." The sin is that a man, favored by his status as a man, would allow himself to be treated "like a woman." The classic defense in a gay bashing case is "he made a pass at me." Can you imagine how empty the streets would be if we locked up every man who had ever made a pass at a woman? That's "normal." But for a man to allow himself to be treated like a piece of meat by another man is to defy the gods, and to defy the privilege that comes with being male. In recent times, before people knew many gay couples, people (mostly men) would often inquire as to which one was the "woman" in the relationship. In other words, which was allowing himself to be denigrated "like a woman?" In ancient times, it was not uncommon for one army, when it had prevailed over another army, to rape the vanquished soldiers. In the ancient mind, nothing was so degrading, nothing was so symbolically victorious over another, than to treat another man like a woman.

And with respect to those passages in Leviticus, there is even some evidence that the punishment meted out in ancient Biblical days for defying the proscription to same sex behavior (which is only a proscription between men, by the way, not women) was administered only to the receptive partner in anal intercourse, not the insertive partner, because only he was acting like a woman. At least the insertive partner was still acting “like a man.” It seems that the reason female same sex behavior is only mentioned once, in the New Testament, is that women are already at the low end of the status totem pole. It is the usurping of male privilege and status that seems to be the “abomination.”

If you doubt the currency of this misogynistic attitude, go to the video store and rent any movie about football. At some point, in every single one of these movies, when the team is about to lose the big game, and the coach needs to pump them up, the coach will belittle, anger and presumably empower the team by calling them a bunch of girls. Why does that work? Because nothing could be worse!

All of this is to say that what I think we see going on in our society and in the Church is nothing short of the beginning of the end of patriarchy. For a very long time now, most of the decisions affecting the world have been made by white, heterosexual, educated, Western men. Ever so gradually, people of color have been invited to that table; then women, and now gay and lesbian people. And things will never be the same when the oppressed have a voice. But it's no wonder the resistance is so fierce, given that we are changing a patriarchal system that has been in place almost forever.

How do we now move forward? And what is the rightful role of religion in this public discourse? Unlike some issues that have faced us in the past, the movement forward in the civil realm is tied intimately to moving forward in the religious realm. There is perhaps no other prejudice, enshrined in the laws of the land, so based on sacred scripture, so entwined with our theological understanding of the nature of humankind and the sexuality which proves to be both its blessing and its curse. No other attitude in the body politic is so tied to an attitude stemming from a particular Judaeo-Christian teaching. Change in no other social attitude in the secular culture is so tied to change in religious belief.

I believe that it will take religious people and religious voices to undo the harm that has been done by religious institutions. While we are seeing a decline in the number of people who experience and express their spirituality in and through a formal religious institution, it is still a powerful force within the culture, generally working against progress in the inclusion and full civil rights for gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. It is time that progressive Christians rescue the Bible from the Religious Right which has held it hostage and claimed it as its own private territory for far too long. It

is time that Christians and Jews actually read the holy scripture they claim is the basis for their beliefs, instead of simply believing what they are TOLD it says by others. It's time we use reputable scholarship, sound reason, and thoughtful exploration to understand what the words of scripture meant to the person who authored them and what it meant to the people for whom they were written, before deciding whether or not those words are binding on those outside that cultural context. It's time that progressive religious people stop being ashamed of their faith and fearful that they will be identified with the Religious Right, and start preaching the Good News of the liberating Christ which includes ALL of God's children.

But if the Religious Right has gotten it wrong in inserting their viewpoint into the public debate, what is a good, positive and appropriate way to voice one's religious convictions in public discourse. It is, I believe a simple shift in focus from the public to the private in these expressions. I am personally guided by my faith. My belief in God, my understanding of God's vision for humankind and God's will for us as children of God shapes my opinions about the way our secular culture, institutions and government should be run. I am even free to express my own personal and religious reasons for coming to the opinions I express. But the minute I start making the argument that YOU must come to those same opinions because MY religious truth is not only MY truth, but also YOUR truth, indeed THE truth, then I violate that divide between private and public. James Dobson or Pat Robertson are perfectly free to tell me about their religious beliefs which compel them to oppose acceptance of gay people; but they cannot make the claim that their beliefs are right and true for all of humankind, and therefore must be MY beliefs and guide MY thinking as well. That is to move from democracy to theocracy – a movement not at all opposed by many on the Religious Right.

Similarly, if I am going to make arguments for the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people in this society, I must do so on their own merits, not on any claim that my understanding of God is right and true and therefore must be compelling to everyone. I must make those arguments based on decency, compassion, democratic principles, the Constitution and a notion of the common good – not on any reading of any sacred text to which I might subscribe.

I think we need to separate, as best we can, the civil realm from the religious. This is especially important in the struggle for equal civil marriage rights for all our citizens. Clergy have long acted as agents of the State in the solemnization of marriages.⁴⁴ Because a priest, or rabbi, or minister acts on

44. See, e.g., FLA. STAT. § 741.07 (2007).

behalf of the State in signing the marriage license and attesting to the proper enactment of the marriage, we have lost the distinction between what the State does, and what the religious institution does. In fact, the State effects the marriage.⁴⁵ Then the Church goes on to pronounce its blessing upon that union.⁴⁶ In France, everyone is married at the mayor's office; then those who are religious reconvene at the church for the religious blessing of that marriage.⁴⁷ Those who are not religious or do not desire such a blessing are, of course, are still fully married according to the laws of the State.⁴⁸ In such an arrangement, it is clear where the State's action ends and the Church's action begins.

I have argued that we need to make a clear distinction between civil r-i-g-h-t-s and religious r-i-t-e-s. It may take many years for religious institutions to add their blessing to same sex marriages, and no church or synagogue should be forced to do so, but that should not slow down progress toward the full CIVIL right to marriage as executed by the State for the benefit and stability of the society. Because New Hampshire will have legal civil unions beginning in January, my partner of twenty years and I will enter into such a legal union next June. On the steps of the State capitol, our legal, civil union will be solemnized by our female Jewish lawyer. That's the civil part, accountable to the State. Then we will walk across the street to St. Paul's Church for prayers of thanksgiving and blessing for that union, which is the purview of the Church. Such a separation of the roles of Church and State might be helpful in lots of ways. Perhaps it is a separation that ought to be made for all couples, heterosexual and homosexual alike.

I am actually very hopeful about the future. Christians are hopeful by nature – not because we have any special confidence in the desire of human beings to do the right thing, but because of our confidence in God to keep prodding, inspiring and calling us to do the right thing. My faith tells me that God is always working for the coming of the kind of Kingdom in which all are respected, all are valued, all are included. My faith tells me how all this is going to end: it's going to end with the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the society and in the life and leadership of the Church. I believe that the Holy Spirit is working within the Church and within the culture to bring that full inclusion about, and in the end, God will not be foiled. In the

45. *See, e.g., id.* § 741.08.

46. *See, e.g., id.* § 741.07.

47. *See* The American Cathedral in Paris: Weddings <http://www.americancathedral.org/en/ourcath/weddings.html> (last visited May 28, 2008).

48. *See* Americans in France: Classic French Wedding, http://www.americansinfrance.net/Culture/Classic_French_Wedding.cfm (last visited May 28, 2008).

meantime, we need to work with all our might, intellect, and dollars to bring that new world into existence.

What an exciting time to be alive! What an amazing thing to have lived to see! How unimaginable all this was for that geeky gay kid growing up in rural Kentucky in the 50's. I may not see full acceptance and inclusion in my lifetime, but that's okay. It is enough to be a part of the journey.

One of my favorite places on earth is the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. It is built into the old Lorraine Hotel, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. At the entrance to the museum is a huge, black marble monolith. As you get closer to it, you see, in *bas relief*, a spiraling procession of African-Americans rising ever upward, progressing toward their destined freedom – and every single one of them is standing on someone else's shoulders. That's the way it is with the struggle for human rights. It's a long hard journey, but we are not alone. We are always prepared for our roles by those who have gone ahead of us; and we are always making it possible for others to stand on our shoulders. But in the end, it's being in that ascending parade that counts; it's playing whatever role we can, courageously doing what we can do to move the march forward, that makes the pain bearable and life worth living. And, as a person of faith, I also know we are not alone because God is beside us, comforting, encouraging and sustaining us along the way toward a world which values ALL of God's children.

I invite you to join in this glorious march upward and forward. You will meet some astounding people, gay AND straight, who know that the love of God knows no bounds, and that ALL of us are loved beyond our wildest imagining by the God of all that is. As the chorus of the song about Harriet Tubman's underground slave railroad says, "Come on up, I've got a lifeline. Come on up to this train of mine." This train is bound for full equality and acceptance of ALL of God's children. Welcome aboard!

Thank you.

TRANSCRIPT OF QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION WITH BISHOP ROBINSON⁴⁹

Bishop (B): Thank you for being here.

Questioner 1 (Q1): Yep, and I don't know, I'm stunned. The number of arguments, frankly you're very articulate, I was begging to be able to respond. I hope that the institution will allow some formal or even informal

49. The Bishop took questions from the audience after presenting his lecture. The transcript was made from an audio/video recording of the entire session, and unless otherwise noted by brackets "[]", represents a verbatim transcription of the entire session.

way to respond to this because there are a lot of responses to your assertions that are not being heard and for those who may not be initiated I am a minister so I, I know some of the inside stuff that you were alluding to if you go to Leviticus all of the things that you were referring to so I was a little disturbed that maybe people who are not initiated might not understand or hear some other side. I thought of a question and I'd like to, if you don't mind, make a comment, refer to a quote that you made and then ask you a question.

B: Okay

Q1: You said that the bible teaches and that the church has historically confessed that God is absolutely perfect and does not change and we call this the doctrine of immutability, everybody should know that and because of that the, the foundation of morality was built upon that the fact that because God does not change His moral law does not change so the church believes that human nature hasn't changed either we are still ostensibly the same kind of people so the answers to the bible they have for us whether it was revealed Moses for a thousand years ago or through Jesus two-thousand years ago their still applicable because God hasn't changed and human nature hasn't changed. Now this is what you said in an article in the UK Guardian dated November 4th, it said we worship a living God, not one locked up in scriptures of 2000 yrs ago, it referring to homosexuality is not something of which I should repent and I have no intention of doing so I've been led to understand that I love my God just as I am so here's my comment or question. This seems to imply that you've, you have departed and you did refer to that in your comments from the Bible and from historic Christian theology and ethics and believe that God is free, He is no longer locked up by His scripture he is free to change His moral law and if change means anything it means either progress or regression right? Change by definition means change so He's either getting more moral or He's getting more immoral so why did over 2,000 yrs ago in Christ or 4,000 yrs ago in Moses did God not get it right when He censured the act of homosexuality?

B: Hey, thanks for your question.

Q1: And maybe, a couple of follow ups if you don't mind.

B: Well, actually, we are going to give other people a chance to do that but let me try to respond. I would agree with most everything that you said if in fact I thought that humanity's comprehension of God's goodness, God's love, God's intention, God's will, were perfect. I understand Holy Scripture to be this kind of magnificent story of a love affair of God with human kind. It's not God that has changed—but I do believe that our apprehension, our comprehension, of God's will for us is constantly changing. Hopefully, as you say, we are progressing instead of regressing – that is to say, that we are able to apprehend and comprehend God's Will for us better all the time. So I would say that the law as perceived by Moses and by a countless panoply of

saints and prophets and martyrs were doing the best they could do to comprehend all that God is, and that's exactly what I'm trying to do.

Q1: How can we ignore that....

Background: One question, one question is all we can do.

B: So, you know, come see me, come see me another time, while I'm here, and we'll talk about that. My point is that God isn't changing but our ability to apprehend God and God's will for us is always flawed because we're not God. Just because God is perfect doesn't mean that we perfectly understand God and so my sense is that the church is doing the best it can. It did that 2,000 yrs ago, it did that 1,000 yrs ago before the Reformation, it did it after the Reformation and we're still working at it. Let me just add one last thing: I want to be in the church with you. I don't know if you want me to be in your church, but I want you in my church. That is to say, I am not sure that we have to agree about all of these things in order to find our unity in our faith. We are both Christians and believe in Jesus as the Christ and trust that a loving God will take care of whatever those differences are. Yes sir, wait for the microphone.

Q2: Yes, I am Father John McNeil and it's a great privilege to be on this side

B: Actually, this is one of the great hero's of my life, John McNeil.

Q2: There is a statement by the disciples of Emmaus, "were not our hearts burning within us" when we heard the words of exchange? My heart was burning tonight. I want to thank you. I have had a gay ministry for 40 years and to have you come along and do such a beautiful job, it fills my heart with gratitude just to die. Thank you.

B: Thank you. Just a personal note here, when I was struggling with whether or not I could claim who I was, I was still married, and my wife and I were talking about all this, as we had talked about it during most of our marriage. I went off to Kirkridge Conference Center, to a retreat led by Father John McNeil. You inspired me then; you continue to inspire me. Thank you for all that you've done, really.

Q3: Thanks for being here. I'm a Christian as well, I was baptized when I was 16, tutored by a Christian missionary and his wife, and I took the Bible very seriously, I obviously still do and me and my wife took it so seriously that when we dated we abstained from sexual relations until our wedding night and we did that because we have great respect for this book, the Holy Scriptures, because that's what it told us to do, and it told us that sex is between a man and a woman within marriage and anything outside of that is un-Christian that is what Christianity teaches in this book and I don't believe anyone rationalizing and saying other things.

Is there a question?

Q3: And the reason this book is so important, you talked about the Jesus event being more important than the actual Holy Bible, okay, and Im'a tell you why you're wrong.

Is there a question? Sir, is there a question?

Q3: You lay the premise, then you ask the question.

B: Sir, go ahead, go ahead.

Q3: There are a lot of things you said that I think are incorrect but I'll limit it to this and then maybe we can talk later.

B: Great.

Q3: But I'm glad you're here. Really. Thank you for coming.

B: You're welcome.

Q3: When Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights, remember that? And as Satan took him up the mountain and three times Satan tried to get Jesus to sin.

B: mm hmm.

Q3: Each time, Jesus refuted Satan and you know how he did it? He said to Satan, in reply Jesus said, excuse me, it is written lets not live on protocol and again He said it is written, Jehovah your God, your holy God, let's not put to the test. Then Jesus said to him go away Satan for it is written as the Lord our God alone we must worship. So Jesus refuted Satan by referring to the written word which is this book okay so that's what...

B: Well that book [the Bible] didn't exist actually. But that's all right.

Q3: Well, Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy, yes the Old Testament.

B: Yes.

Q3: Now quickly...

B: No, no, you have to --- now it's time for a question.

Q3: Okay, here's my question. True Christian teachings are found in the written word okay and it says clearly in other scriptures which you won't let me finish that marriage is between a man and a woman and Jesus defined marriage as between a man and a woman in Matthew 19:45 when he quoted and Genesis 1:28 that you alluded to earlier so my question to you is, why do you know better or more than Jesus and the apostles did?

B: That is a little bit of a loaded question. Not stated quite fairly, but let me try to respond. First of all, I don't know better than anybody in this room and I would never claim that. I was invited here to tell you what I think and that's what I've tried to do. Second of all, I don't, I don't think any of us knows completely the Will of God, I mean, I would be very nervous around anyone who claimed to know what God thinks—so that's why I'm nervous around you. Let me, let me...

Q3: ...this book, that's how you know Jesus, so respect this book.

B: Listen, I owe my... listen to me, listen to me.

Q3: He does, he believes about Jesus because he knows from this book, that's why he should respect this book.

B: Would you listen to me? I owe my life to that book because when I was growing up in my quite fundamentalist church, I heard God's voice through that book despite what my church was doing with that book. My church was using that book to beat me up and demean me, and God's voice came through that book, saying to me exactly what God said to Jesus at his baptism, saying to me, "You are my beloved, in you I am well pleased." So don't make assumptions about what I do and don't think about that book. I owe my life to that book! I would probably be physically dead because I would have committed suicide were it not for God's voice coming through that book, so nobody takes that book any more seriously than I do. However, however, I do not believe that that is the only way that God reveals God's self. I believe in a living God who is constantly interacting with you, and me, and anyone else who is open to it and that is also a source of revelation. And while I believe that book to be the best witness to the perfect revelation of God in Christ Jesus, I do not believe it to be the only witness to the reality of God.

Audience: Amen.

Professor Niedwiecki: At this time, I'd like to [inaudible] . . . because at this point we've run well over our time. At this time, I'd like to continue the dialogue and everyone is welcome to the reception which is down the hallway there. Thank you very much. You're an inspiration.

B: You're welcome.