

God and Gays

Even if I were to persuade you of a deep congeniality between scientific and Christian understandings of the cosmos and of human nature, and even if I were to convince you that an active faith restrains divorce, smoking, crime, and other antisocial behaviors, you would likely still recoil when encountering religion-justified homophobia and racial and gender prejudice. Be assured, many of us faith-heads also recoil. Here, as with understandings of evolution, there is a huge gulf between the assumptions and attitudes of scientists (including academic psychologists who are people of faith) and those of many Christians. And here again, that wisdom of Proverbs (19:2) applies: “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge.”

Recognizing that the church is ground zero for the gay marriage debate, and hoping to contribute information to that conversation, Letha Dawson Scanzoni and I recently wrote a short book, *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*. Understanding

why Elton John might think that religion promotes spite toward gays and “turns people into hateful lemmings,” we wanted to reassure you, our secular friends, that Christianity is not intrinsically antagonistic to gays and lesbians. But our main goal was to help bridge the divide between marriage-supporting and gay-supporting people of faith by documenting the following assertions:

- *All humans have a deep “need to belong,” to connect with others in close, intimate, enduring relationships. We are, as Aristotle recognized long ago, “the social animal.” Solitary confinement, ostracism, and banishment from close relationships lead to genuine pain. Show social scientists a community where marriages are plentiful, and they will show you a community with mostly healthy and happy people, thriving kids, and low crime rates. Celebrities who really care about children (Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt come to mind) could exemplify the social ecology that best nurtures youth: by marrying their partners. They could model the message that marriage matters.*

- *Radical individualism and the media modeling of impulsive sexuality are corroding marriage and the health of communities. There is ample evidence to support these contentions. As I documented in an earlier book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, there is a social cost to*

focusing on “me” to the exclusion of “we” and to modeling sexuality and its consequences as mere recreation rather than as a life-uniting, love-renewing force.

- *Sexual orientation is not a personal choice, but rather a natural (largely biologically influenced) disposition, most clearly so for men. A host of recent neuroscience studies offer a dozen you-never-would-have-guessed discoveries of gay-straight differences in traits ranging from fingerprint patterns to hair whorl direction to skill at mentally rotating geometric figures.*

- *Sexual orientation is an enduring disposition that is seldom reversed by willpower, reparative therapy, or ex-gay ministry. “Can therapy change sexual orientation?” asks an American Psychological Association statement. “No. [It] is not changeable.” There are anecdotes of ex-gays, but these are offset by anecdotes of ex-ex-gays—often the same people a few years later. And claims of “healing” are becoming fewer and more modest.*

- *The Bible has nothing to say about an enduring sexual orientation (a modern concept) or about loving, long-term same-sex partnerships. Out of 31,103 Bible verses, only seven frequently quoted verses (none the words of Jesus) speak directly of same-sex behavior—and mostly in the context of idolatry, temple prostitution, adultery, child exploitation, or violence. By contrast, noted*

the Christian humanitarian rocker Bono in his 2006 National Prayer Breakfast talk, “poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times. . . . That’s a lot of air time.” Be assured, my skeptical friends, the church’s distraction over a very few debatable verses—mere needles in the haystack of biblical teachings—does not represent the priorities of Jesus.

- *There is a Christian case for gay marriage*, which arises from the human need to belong, from the biblical mandate for justice, from the benefits of a culturewide norm of monogamy, and from a refutation of popular arguments against gay marriage.

“Whoa!” say critics on the religious right. “By encouraging ‘open and affirming’ attitudes, you are aiding the spread of homosexuality!” To check this presumption—that social attitudes influence sexual orientation—I retrieved National Opinion Research Center data from 1988 and then from 2004 (after sixteen years of visibly increased acceptance of gays and lesbians in the media and in various vocations). In 1988, when the question was first asked with procedures that assured anonymity, 97 percent of sexually active males reported having exclusively female partners during the previous year. In 2004, the most recent year for which data are available, the result was still 97 percent. (Among sexually active females, 99 percent in 2004 reported

having exclusively male partners during the previous year.) Today's more open and affirming attitudes seem not to be influencing the population's sexual orientation.

So we say to our fellow people of faith: should we not put on our social radar screens the concerns that Jesus had on his? What would Jesus do? Rather than tie "onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry," as Jesus said of the Pharisees, why not offer a positive affirmation of monogamy? Why not stand up for healthy relationships that satisfy the human need to belong within covenant partnerships? Rather than advocating a sexual double standard for straight people (marry or be celibate) and gay people (sorry, you must be celibate), why not proclaim a single Christian sexual ethic? Why not yoke sex with faithfulness? Why not seal love with commitment? Why not foster a conservative, marriage-supporting positive argument: that the world would be a happier and healthier place if, *for all people*, sex, love, and marriage routinely went together?

Genuine biblical priorities may be something other than what we Christians sometimes propound. The Bible is like the U.S. Constitution: it says many things clearly, and these form the agreed foundation of our communal life while leaving us to argue its implications for many other issues. For the Bible's minor topics (those with but a few debated verses set in a particular cultural context), it is tempting to project one's ideas into God's mouth,

thus making the Bible say what we believe. When you catch us doing this, call us on it.

The influence of one's preconceptions on biblical interpretation is no surprise to anyone familiar with psychological research. Our expectations and "mental sets" can powerfully

predispose what we perceive and how we interpret the world around us. To believe is to see. For example,

We hear and apprehend only what we already half know.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, JOURNAL ENTRY, JAN. 5, 1860

after presidential debates, partisans overwhelmingly perceive their candidate as having won. A 1995 Gallup Poll found that after hearing much the same evidence, 78 percent of blacks but only 42 percent of whites approved O. J. Simpson's "not guilty" verdict. We view reality through the spectacles of our beliefs, attitudes, and values. This is one reason why our beliefs are important: they shape our interpretation of everything else.

If the Bible actually has little, if anything, directly to say about sexual orientation and loving, committed, same-sex partnerships, and if faithful Christians disagree about the few pertinent biblical texts, then, you may wonder, why is the church so preoccupied with this issue (as opposed, say, to concern for justice, the poor, and our stewardship of the creation, about which the Bible has so much to say)?

The University of Virginia social psychologist Jonathan Haidt suggests an explanation for the church's current preoccupation. Often, his research shows, the rationalist idea that we reason our way to moral judgments has it backward. Instead, we make instant gut-level moral judgments and then seek rationalizations for our feelings (another example of emotions feeding thinking). Many people, he finds, will feel instant disgust over an objectively harmless but degrading behavior, such as scrubbing a toilet with the flag, and will then mentally scramble to construct moral reasons that support their moral intuition. First come the feelings, then the rationalization.

Recent studies have similarly found that prejudice arises less from cerebral justifications than from automatic, gut-level reactions that seek justification. Reason is often the slave of passion. Moral reasoning therefore aims to convince others of what we intuitively feel, which in times past has led people to find in the Bible ample support for the subordination of African Americans and women. Haidt's research also helps us understand why surveys find that people with gay friends come to have more accepting attitudes and also to have more supportive opinions about gay rights and gay marriage. (As empathy replaces disgust, one's rationalizations change.) And no wonder men—who,

A FRIENDLY LETTER TO SKEPTICS AND ATHEISTS

more than women, feel disgust over same-sex relationships—write most of the antigay tracts.

Those of us who support an inclusive promonogamy norm can take heart that more and more people see the welcoming of gay people into monogamy—into marriage—as a positive trend while also seeing declines in teen pregnancy and increases in teen abstinence as positive trends. Marriage nevertheless is in trouble. With the marriage rate having declined, with most first marriages preceded by cohabitation, with 39 percent of American children in 2006 born outside of marriage, and with pornography a bigger business than professional football, there is surely a need to refocus on the family. Alas, rather than focus on getting and keeping people married, the church is diverting its energy into keeping gay people *unmarried*. One is reminded of senior devil Screwtape’s advice (in C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*) on how to corrupt: “The game is to have them all running about with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood.”