

Religious Freedom of Discrimination

Thesis: *Freedom of religion does not afford someone the right to discriminate against another person because religions, particularly the Christian faiths, are based on love and compassion.*

“Benjamin felt a nose nuzzling at his shoulder. He looked round. It was Clover. Her old eyes looked dimmer than ever. Without saying anything, she tugged gently at his mane and led him round to the end of the big barn, where the Seven Commandments were written. For a minute or two they stood gazing at the tatted wall with its white lettering. ‘*My sight is failing,*’ she said finally. ‘*Even when I was young I could not have read what was written there. But it appears to me that that wall looks different. Are the Seven Commandments the same as they used to be Benjamin?*’ For once Benjamin consented to break his rule, and he read out to her what was written on the wall. There was nothing there now except a single Commandment. It ran: *ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL, BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS.*” (Orwell, 1945)

Discrimination occurs when a specific group of people is treated as second-class citizens and separate laws are applied to that bloc. To establish a Constitutional Amendment that defines marriages as strictly heterosexual is State sanctioned bigotry. Has America metamorphosed back into an “*Animal Farmesque*” state? Are there truly some citizens that are more equal than others are?

Freedom of religion does not afford someone the right to discriminate against another person because religions, particularly the Christian faiths, are based on love and compassion. So how can discrimination of the homosexual community be a mainstream ideal considering the civil

rights movement, the founding principals of our nation, and the true message of the Christian faith? To understand and resolve these discrepancies in American culture one must first examine the social issue of homosexuality in America, the prominence of the Religious Right and Conservatism, and the effects that being ostracized has on individuals and society in order to reach a possible solution.

Homosexuality is neither a consequence of moral decline nor a perversion. Sexuality is an inherent aspect of humanity. Our in-utero development is based on genetic blueprints that determine our height, hair color, and personality. This genetic code also dictates our intrinsic sexual orientation, which begins to manifest at a very young age. Children who play “*Doctor*” and *Spin-the Bottle* are expressing their curiosity about manifest predilections. At the puberty stage individuals begin to have fantasies and relationships that result in certain levels of experimentation, enhanced by the influx of hormones. In a community of openness and understanding homosexual behavior would be accepted as a natural tendency. Unfortunately, that is not the case in our culture.

To debate whether heterosexuality or homosexuality is normal is like debating whether being right-handed or left-handed is normal. People are who they were born to be. American culture is replete with cases of brutal discrimination, bigotry, and genocide. One group after another has been victimized by “*traditional American values,*” based on gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. Individuals who do not fit into a specific category are labeled misfits and treated in the same manner. The LGBTQ community has been subject to the same brutality as African Americans and Native Americans.

Americans have been taught, from infancy, to hide or shun behavior that does not fit into the norm. Forcing homosexuals to stay “*in the closet*” stifles their emotional growth. We have all been told to stifle certain behaviors and habits. Now, imagine if your sexuality was forcibly hidden. The result of stifling identity is a social disconnect that leads to self-loathing, distrust of others, stigmatization, and suicidal tendencies. However, suppression is not a tactic that works universally. Some people, when forced to repress natural urges, will lash out verbally, physically, and even artistically. The cases of death and destruction inflicted on homosexuals, who refuse to adhere to authoritarian coercion, are endless. Being an LGBTQ American is not only dangerous it can be deadly.

I attended a diversity seminar at my place of employment. The guest speaker was an ex-Boston police officer who worked undercover catching street thugs. Some nights this officer had to walk out of a gay bar and was always attacked; stating that he was stabbed, kicked in the teeth, and had his ribs broken. This policeman described the rage that people felt towards homosexuals and the social acceptance of those violent crimes.

Why does the very existence of homosexuality threaten people to the extent that they would commit brutal beatings and murder? Where does this hatred come from and why do we allow it to continue? Except for abhorrent sexual behavior, such as pedophilia or bestiality, no political or social group should judge the sexual practices of consenting adults. People who, purposefully or unintentionally, misinterpret the Holy Bible commit most of the hostility and vicious attacks against homosexuals. One study shows that “*the role of religion is paradoxical. It makes*

prejudice and it unmakes prejudice. While the creeds of the great religions are universalistic, all stressing brotherhood, the practice of these creeds is frequently divisive and brutal. The sublimity of religious ideals is offset by the horrors of persecution in the name of these same ideals...Churchgoers are more prejudiced than the average; they are also less prejudiced than the average” (Laythe).

The Religious Right has gained prominence in our society since the Ronald Reagan presidency. Their reach has seeped into the industries that control public policy and opinion. Among many offenses against civil liberties, they have attempted to hide discrimination behind the façade of religious freedom. This not only subjugates the targeted citizenry, but also denigrates the true message of that faith. Under the guise, “*protecting the sanctity of marriage,*” religious groups have galvanized efforts to discriminate against the LGBTQ community. Homosexual couples are constantly refused the same rights and privileges as heterosexual couples, wed and unwed.

“Instead of helping to rehabilitate the institution of marriage, the polarizing debate over these Amendments served as distractions. Bashing a minority is a lot easier and more lucrative for “pro-family” groups than facing true threats to the family like divorce, abuse, addiction, unemployment and infidelity” (Besen). The institute of marriage currently lacks any notion of commitment. Couples can get married within days of meeting. A divorce or legal separation is even easier to obtain than the marriage: unless the couple is homosexual. An exemplification of religious group’s bigotry occurred when several states passed anti-discrimination laws that included sexual orientation. Christian coalition and “*pro-family*” groups protested those laws as a violation of their freedom of religion. These groups insist on the right to not employ persons

based on his or her sexuality as well as the performance of intolerant sermons that demonize the LGBTQ community. When does freedom of speech go too far? More importantly, does not freedom of religion afford each of us freedom *from* religion?

One does not have to be homosexual, bi-sexual, or transsexual to understand that the LGBTQ community is unfairly attacked verbally, physically, and socially through conventional policy and political machinations. Every culture and society establish a norm, which is the basis for acceptable behaviors. However, each person is individualistic and displays those societal traits through his or her personality. To fit in and be accepted within a group is a basic human tendency. Yet expressing oneself through innate talents and artistry is a stronger need.

Communities throughout history have ostracized people or groups when social norms are not met. The Japanese shunned people with deformities. Religious groups have also cast-out and victimized people who opposed that faction's ideology.

As a child, bullies constantly abused me both verbally and physically. I have come to recognize this thug mentality as oppression. As an adult I see those same tactics employed everywhere from the workplace, law enforcement, and our political leaders. The elitism cultivated within my high school is epitomized in the current environment of personal responsibility and individualism. People are judged by their economic position and material possessions. The fear, pain, and angst that I endured not only came from classmates; I also faced daily hostility from teachers, family members, and several passersby. Family gatherings became so painful that I

ceased to go, even for Christmas. I have talked to several homosexual friends who had the same experiences, though some more severe than my own.

“Total obsequiousness is probably not terribly healthy or functional. They could also lead to anti-social, retaliative, ‘lashing out’ responses” (Williams, 2005). Vengeful attacks have become prevalent, evidenced by the Columbine high school shootings and the many other schoolyard killings that followed. Although I do not condone the violent reactions of those troubled youths, I understand why they attacked their classmates. If any of the shooters in Columbine had gone through the same brutality as I had, and they claimed as much; then I understand.

We live in a business-run society, which preaches that there must be winners and losers: rich and poor. In fact, whenever I point out inequality or racial bigotry the response is usually to blame the victim. This tactic has been indoctrinated into most people since the end of World War II and is one of the sparks that ignited conditions such as the *“angry white male”* syndrome. People are angry without knowing exactly why. Blame is misplaced or misdirected, and the real issues are avoided, or insinuated upon the wrong groups. As the rock group Rage Against the Machine eloquently stated in their song, Know Your Enemy *“Yes, I know my enemy. They are the teachers who taught me to fight me; compromise, conformity, assimilation, submission, ignorance, hypocrisy, brutality, the elite. All of which are American dreams” (Rage Against the Machine, 1992).*

Yet, there is hope, because not every single person subscribes to hatred or bigotry. “*Not everyone embraces homosexuality, but they are willing to allow others to conduct their lives as they see fit*” (Bull, 1997). Our future depends on the children and what is taught to them. Private and public-school curriculums must include tolerance education, which would teach students not only about various cultures, religions, and orientations but would show the similarities inherent to all people. Regardless of the political backlash from fundamentalist religious groups, our society must stop the violence at the root causes. One such source is the bigotry and greed instilled in our children from every media outlet.

In conclusion, even though spirituality is a necessary piece of the humanity puzzle, organized religions must be regulated to some extent. Any group that preaches doctrines of hate and intolerance must be charged with a crime. In the corporate world, human resource policies concerning violent abuse include verbal assaults and tones of voice. Freedom of speech can not protect hate-speech as more victims begin retaliating against real and imagined tormentors. In the end, we are faced with an increase in the frequency and ferocity of violent crimes. One must always remember that homosexuals are people too. Each person in the world hurts, laughs, cries, and loves whether he or she is homosexual, transsexual, or heterosexual. We, as a society, can make the necessary changes that will bring solidarity and understanding to our culture. Our responsibility is to choose the path of compassion and understanding and that is well within our power.

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