

CHAPTER 1

Speaking Right

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

—2 Chronicles 7:14

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

—1 Corinthians 2:14

Queer Is as Queer Does

In the Southern Baptist church of my youth I never heard any of the graphic descriptions of same-sex sexual practices that have been commonplace in the years since. I knew that although there are many sins that grieve Jesus, homosexuality is particularly loathsome, perhaps not only to his people but also to the creator himself. This I learned in the indirect way that constitutes much socialization and folk knowledge transmission. In the rare moments when Southern Baptist elders spoke of homosexuality, even if they denied that it was any worse than, say, bearing false witness or lusting (heterosexually) in one's heart, they managed to convey the opposite. As we listened, we knew that God saved his most severe disapprobation for homosexuals. And perhaps we even doubted that homosexuals could *really* be saved, not because sexuality is inextricable from the impressive constellation of traits and feelings that constitute the self but because homosexuality is so, well, icky. As a teenaged “prehomosexual,” I was alert to every pronouncement—indeed, to every unspoken nuance—on the subject. What was clear to me then was what my mother, upon learning of my sexual orientation, made explicit: being

sexual with a person of the same sex was the worst violation of the laws of God and nature that any person can accomplish. Like her co-religionists, when she learned of my orientation she wanted me to repent and change.

Fittingly, I encountered my first “ex-gay” in a lesbian bar. Before the mainstream popularization of ex-gay and reparative therapies, if not before the medical and psychological treatment of homosexuals, an ex-gay witnessing to practicing gays would need to go where the gays were. And in those days the gays were in bars, clubs, baths, and other settings where queers could congregate away from the attention of straights. I don’t want to suggest that ex-gays only haunted queer gathering places back in the “old” days of the 1970s and early ’80s, when I met “my” ex-gay. Queers today wryly note that ex-gays still have an affinity for gay spaces. In 2000, activist Wayne Besen sprinted several blocks through the Dupont Circle neighborhood of Washington, DC, to confront and photograph the ex-gay John Paulk in a now-defunct club called Mr. P’s. Paulk’s late-night comfort stop only exemplified the many cases of backsliding of putative ex-gays who seem to be more “gay” than “ex.”

The ex-lesbian I met in Washington, DC, in 1981 was in her mid- to late forties, about as old as I am now. She sat at the bar of a popular club called *The Other Side* and tried to share her Christian witness. Over the pounding beat of dance music, the woman tried to chat with us—two lesbians half her age—about her journey out of homosexuality. This was not a journey I had any interest in making. But my girlfriend was intrigued by the oddness of someone lying in wait in a noisy lesbian club to try to turn women away from the pursuit of love, and she wanted to hear more. Alas, that longer conversation would not take place that evening. When my girlfriend and I shared a light kiss, the ex-lesbian intoned a paraphrase of Hebrews 13:4: “thou shalt not defile the marriage bed.”¹ Looking back, I wish I’d taken the time to talk with her. Instead, I banished her from our company and waited many years before I began to think seriously about what motivates such a reformation of identity.

The ex-lesbian did not succeed in persuading either of us to turn away from homosexuality—not even close. She seemed to me a forlorn representative of a world that was disappearing. But I was wrong. Instead, she was in the vanguard of a dynamic movement that has branched out into academic research, public relations, and political influence. There was a time when I could just walk away from the message of the Christian right’s antigay movement, but that time is no longer. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, if one is attacked as a homosexual, one must defend oneself as a homosexual. Not as an American, not as a world citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever.²

Defiling Beds, Hearts, and Minds

For a quarter of a century, conservative Christian groups have been advertising the perversions of lesbians and gay men in sermons, literature, and fundraising

envelopes marked for adult eyes only. Many mass mailings have featured photos of costumed (and sometimes semi-nude) lesbians and gay men, usually snapped at Gay Pride events in major cities. Photos such as these—young women and men semi-clad or in leather paraphernalia, same-sex couples embracing and kissing—found their way into mass-market public relations vehicles like videos and political advertisements.

Christian conservatives pointed to representations like these to demonstrate the hidden gay agenda, ignoring, as many queers have enjoyed pointing out, the *other* gay agenda of working, shopping, paying taxes, visiting with friends, and all the pedestrian activities of daily life. While humorous, such rejoinders to accusations about the gay agenda fail to acknowledge that while lesbians and gay men perceive the pace of change in our social and legal status to be glacially slow, those who disapprove of same-sex sexuality and relations perceive it to be swift and terrible. For them, a world that would reverse the stigma of same-sex sexuality, even slowly and unevenly, is a world that has lost its soul. And they have had no choice but to gird themselves for battle on as many fronts as necessary. This they did, beginning in the 1970s with such efforts as Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign and the Briggs Initiative. And they do so today with ever more media and intellectual sophistication.

In the early days of new Christian right formation, opprobrious depictions of lesbians and gay men were directed to both in-group and public audiences. Today the conservative Christian leaders are more careful about how they manage images of the movement and its adversaries. As we shall see, some Christian right leaders and arenas still direct censorious representations of queers to Christian right insiders and to those perceived as likely allies. Depending upon the speaker and context, gay men may continue to be portrayed as raunchy, sexually promiscuous, diseased, atheist, and threatening. In addition, and Justice Antonin Scalia is on record on this point, they are rich. This claim is important because it reverses the legally and politically marginal status of gays.³ Representations of homosexuals as “sexually depraved, superrich, and intent on domination” are still useful to dissolve or hold at bay identification with those marginalized by their sexuality.⁴

But this generalization is too simple to capture the intersections of narratives and venues in which conservative Christian talk about LGBT people appears. One apparent counterexample occurs in counseling and ex-gay literature where sympathetic portrayals, especially of those “struggling” with homosexual attraction, are routine. Another distinction appears when we factor sex into consideration of political rhetoric, disarticulating the L-word from the G. When conservative Christian opinion leaders differentiate lesbians and gay men, we can see that they treat these groups differently.

First, lesbians are often ignored in lubricious discussions of rampant sexuality. It is as though the sexuality of women who have sex and partner romantically with women must remain a black box. This is odd in its own way because

if gay male sexuality has been until quite recently largely absent from popular culture, “the lesbian” is a staple of pop culture’s lower depths. Perhaps this repression of lesbian sexuality helps conservative Christians defend themselves against the potentially arousing flood of sexually explicit popular media images in which “lesbians” appear. Second, when lesbian sexuality comes to the fore it is of the stereotyped masculine variety: aggressive, preying on the innocence of girls and women, mostly indescribable except for its dimensions of hypermasculine (gay, rather than straight) violence and control. One useful conduit for such conceptions of lesbian sexuality has been the recent emphasis in feminist scholarship on violence in lesbian relationships. Paul Cameron’s Family Research Institute (FRI) and other antigay sources use such scholarship as a resource to publicize the risks of lesbianism.⁵

Finally, lesbians may not be considered a threat at all, but rather “sad” and “weak.”⁶ However, when we are designated a threat, lesbians are often an ideological threat, the thinking person’s homosexual menace. From Jesse Helms’s dismissal of Clinton nominee Roberta Achtenberg as a “damn [damned?] lesbian” to the widely circulated intimations of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s same-sex sexuality, the charge of lesbianism clings to women who have the effrontery to transgress gender rules. In the conservative Christian narrative, even those girls and women who cannot be induced to yield to sexual desire for other women may yet be influenced and ruined by lesbianism. Actually, this is consistent with the fear that courses through conservative Christian discussions of same-sex sexuality. Homosexuality, it seems, is preternaturally attractive, so much so that one might be forgiven for failing to understand why there are any heterosexuals left in the world. Besides disseminating propaganda about queer violence, Cameron is a rich source of depictions of the intense physical pleasure associated with queer sex.⁷

When collapsed into feminism, lesbianism is seductive because it represents the impurest of motives: a self-interest untempered by sometimes inconvenient care for others, certainly children and husbands, but one presumes, for others who inhabit the common world as well. Erasing the large numbers of lesbians and gay men who have children, queers are understood as “unencumbered selves,” artists of self-indulgence whose priorities are a rebuke—and perhaps objects of envy—to traditional Americans.⁸ Pat Robertson spoke to both the equation of lesbianism with feminism and the death of care when he crafted the paragraph in a 1992 fundraising letter that still surfaces from time to time on t-shirts and in parodies of the Christian right: “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.”⁹

Sylvia, feminist cartoonist Nicole Hollander’s alter ego, responded to Robertson’s broadside by noting that it constituted a “heavy schedule.”¹⁰ But

those to whom the letter was addressed did not find the news risible. For them social manifestations of evil are no laughing matter, and it is the responsibility of Christians to mobilize themselves to stand firm against them.

Who're You Talking To?

All these meanings and more are packed into various venues, practices, and projects of the Christian right movement. But not all these meanings are available in mainstream media debates over gay issues. This is not mere oversight. Christian right leaders actively strive to have their political and theological beliefs misidentified by the broad public. Many students of the Christian right note the practice of speaking differently to different audiences.¹¹ Unfortunately, mainstream media and political commentators often collude in this strategy by delivering news reports of New Christian right religious issues that are “superficial and lacking context.”¹² Throughout the period of the rise of the New Christian right, approximately the late 1970s to the present, students of politics have tended to make two basic errors: first, they fail to trace the precedents and contexts of baffling or controversial comments by Christian right opinion leaders; second, they overlook the fact that Christian right leaders tend to address subject matter of conservative Christian interest in different rhetorical styles or even with quite different arguments, depending upon the audience they are addressing. The multiple modes of address favored by Christian right leaders reflect changes in rhetorical style and emphasis, and the contents of political arguments.

This gullibility about Christian right messaging is true not only of the mainstream press and critics, but also of the lesbian and gay press, which has particular interests in understanding the deep structure of the intersections of theology and politics. To take only one example, on September 13, 2001, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson proclaimed the root cause of the terrorist strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as the sinfulness of “homosexuals and lesbians,” among other usual suspects. The reaction that followed had liberals and conservatives alike decrying the comments. Soon after, *The Advocate* magazine featured a news bulletin entitled “News of the Year: Far Right.” The bulletin asks rhetorically if “2001 mark[ed] a sea change in the right wing’s willingness to demonize gay people” and concludes: “maybe so, if conservative pundits’ and politicians’ responses to Jerry Falwell’s finger-pointing are any indication.”¹³ Nothing of the sort is true, but we will not know the actual state of conservative politics until we have looked carefully at antigay rhetorics in all the venues and forums where they are at home.

As we know, Christian right opinion leaders often communicate to believers and the receptive in ways that risk alienating others. They may, and often do, hone their messages so they can address different groups in different ways, just as politicians do. Politicians engage in “dog-whistle politics,” signaling to

their ideological constituents at a frequency that others do not hear. So do leaders of other social and political movements. In this, as in other things, the Christian right is not extraordinary.

Even so, the strategy of directing different rhetoric and argument to different audiences is never without seams, contradictions, and unanticipated consequences. One problem is that of ideology; movements do not agree on a single message, emphasis, or perspective even when members agree on broad political goals. For example, some precincts of Christian counseling or the ex-gay movement will not concur with the antigay politics of the large Christian right organizations even if they all hope for similar outcomes. But another set of issues has to do with complications endemic to movement communications with diverse audiences.

In her study of convergences between white supremacy and the Christian right, Ann Burlein notes the efficacy of the common political tools of softening rhetoric and nichemarketing. The first refers to explicit Christian right pedagogy to followers in venues such as training seminars. By softening rhetoric—for example, teaching students not to make political appeals using biblical authority—leaders hope to prepare followers for political work without inspiring charges of religious overreaching and extremism.¹⁴ By nichemarketing, Burlein refers to the way in which organizations such as Focus on the Family and Pete Peters's Christian Identity "sell" their respective brands of ideology; "each ministry speaks an idiom to its constituents."¹⁵ Christian right leaders combine softening rhetoric and nichemarketing to create a complex set of rhetorics that can be directed at different audiences without compromising core theological and political messages.

Both nichemarketing and softening rhetoric are strategies employed by political movements and interest groups to attain their ends in a competitive political environment. Critics of the Christian right recognize such techniques and may come to understand all instances of their use as not only deliberate but also duplicitous and disguising the absence of authentic religious convictions. In their reading, political strategy discloses pure will to power. In what follows I'll challenge that reading of strategy and disclose some of the convictions and complexities that underlie political strategy. It is also important to note that not all message tacticians understand what they do in terms of misleading outsiders. One example is John D. Woodbridge, a professor of Church history and history of Christian thought. Writing in *Christianity Today*, Woodbridge suggests addressing "society" and trying to change public opinion on matters of concern to conservative Christians by using nonbiblical language. Like many political theorists of democracy, he conceptualizes this suggestion as using the "language of the public square."¹⁶

A key hazard of multiple modes of address is that inevitably these movement rhetorics, like "smart" bombs, will not always find their perfect audiences, or only their perfect audiences. Christian right leaders know that messages

to their followers are accessible to their political adversaries. People for the American Way, Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AUSCS), Political Research Associates (PRA), and other progressive organizations consistently monitor Christian right broadcasts, mailings, and conferences and report back to their own members. At a more spontaneous grassroots level of political activity, anyone who attends a conservative church, tunes in to the *700 Club*, surfs Christian right websites, or signs up to receive the mailings of conservative Christian organizations has access to messages that Christian right leaders send their followers. Of course, most citizens lack the time or the inclination to consistently subject themselves to political messages that have little immediate salience for them. Political organizations on the left that function as voices critical of the Christian right do not have a bottomless fund of public interest and attention on which to draw. On the other hand, public versions of these messages—including arguments about LGBT attempts to secure “special rights”—do have a political impact and may be widely embraced by those who are unfamiliar with their theological foundations and political connections.

In fact, conservative Christian life in the United States is broadly characterized by multiple modes of address, in public media as well as in other institutions and across the life span of believers. For example, Christian adolescents learn history and science as they are taught in American secondary schools, but they also learn their own versions of these and other subjects through church sermons, Sunday school, Christian literature, and Christian youth culture. The double vision of Christian conservatives forged in these social institutions is enabling and empowering. Outsiders’ ignorance of their values and beliefs is disabling and disempowering. Much has been made of Ralph Reed’s infamous remark that as an activist conservative Christian he intended to “be invisible,” “do guerilla warfare,” “paint [his] face and travel at night,” and deposit his adversary in a body bag.¹⁷ As students of the Christian Coalition know, Reed refers to political tactics in which activists and candidates for elective office hide hard right Christian positions on issues from unsuspecting voters. Unfortunately, Reed’s adversaries read his electoral strategy too narrowly. They would be better off understanding Reed’s comments to be as much descriptive of the relationship between the Christian right and the rest of America as prescriptive. It is not only voters in particular elections who may be briefly deceived for divine ends. As they struggle to redraw the map of American politics and policy, Christian right leaders too often can count on the apathy or ignorance of nonbelievers and of believers who are Christian, but not *Christian conservative*.¹⁸

Hate the Sin

Liberals and agnostics often ask rhetorically why it is so difficult for Christian conservatives to hold their beliefs, lead their own lives, and leave others to lead

theirs. Such questions may indicate a variety of political dispositions (or, more negatively, betray a number of impulses): political tolerance, a commitment to pluralism or negative liberty, indifference, or mere self-interest. To know what motivates our fellow citizens, we need more information than the simple knowledge that some people approve, and others disapprove, of the morally meddlesome theological politics of the Christian right.

In this endeavor, it is helpful to learn that deep ambivalence about liberal democracy resides at the heart of the conservative Christian movement. Christian conservatives embrace democracy as the best kind of political system that can exist in a flawed temporal world. And there are moments when Christian right leaders embrace populist democracy uncritically, as when they insist that the judicial system be responsive to the expressed will of citizens whose positions on controversial issues coincide with their own. However, as a group, Christian conservatives also profoundly mistrust democracy, identifying liberty with license and with the satisfaction of individual interests through enslavement to selfish desires. There is the additional prophetic conviction that democracies are merely a stage in the irresistible historical movement toward the millennium.¹⁹

Neither of these aspects of a conservative Christian ambivalence toward democracy is difficult to understand. Christian conservatives have seen the role of traditional religion in policy, law, and popular culture decline over the course of American history. The decline has been especially precipitous since World War I: "In modern times, religion, or at least an agreed-upon version of it has lost its place as a prime mode of explaining reality. . . . Religion must make its way by persuasion and not by coercion. It has become escapable and has been relocated on the cultural landscape."²⁰ Church historian Martin Marty published these words in the year Americans elected Jimmy Carter, our first born-again evangelical president. There is irony to describing religion in American democracy today as "escapable." That irony is blunted, however, by the fact that religious elites are currently trying to relocate religion on the cultural landscape by conferring upon it a centrality that has been eroded.

The history of American democracy combines many ingredients, including deep commitments to laissez-faire capitalism and religious traditionalism. These elements have often been at odds with one another. For one thing, many Americans have embraced traditionalism and maintained a stringent critique of the excesses and consequences of capitalism. For another, the potent combination of the free market and individual cultural preferences throw up many ideas, products, and ways of life that do not aspire to any version of Christian virtue. As Lisa McGirr points out in her study of the origins of the new right, social conservatives often find themselves in the position of having to exonerate the amoral operations of the market in their critiques of contemporary American politics.²¹

There are many examples of such exonerating behavior, but consider the example of recent corporate scandals. In the summer of 2002, the Barna Group

unveiled the results of a survey on the gross fiscal misconduct of many large American corporations: "Americans Speak: Enron, WorldCom and Others Are Result of Inadequate Moral Training By Families." Barna is a conservative Christian polling and information organization whose mission is "facilitat[ing] spiritual transformation in America." Barna surveys Americans—distinguishing those who meet criteria as "born again" and "evangelical" from those who don't—but the organization does not limit itself to reporting the results of its polling on a variety of values and cultural issues. It appends editorial comments on the issues for its born-again audience. In the case of Enron, WorldCom and Others, Barna confirms that the most important predictor of felonious corporate misbehavior is the failure of parents to teach their children values.²² This conclusion is consistent with the views expressed by conservative Christian radio personalities at the time to the effect that the real gulf in corporate values lay between born-again and secular CEOs. Structural explanations that examined incentive systems and the ethos of American corporate capitalism were nowhere to be found in conservative Christian accounts of the disaster.

As a social movement, the Christian right influences and is influenced by contemporary liberal and democratic norms and discourse. At the same time, members fantasize collectively that the movement innocently embodies scriptural meaning. The Bible is the unalterable word of God, and its truths are timeless.²³ The optimistic reading of the mutual influence between contemporary liberal democracy and conservative Christian politics is that the Christian right is domesticated by the give and take of democratic politics and thereby passes into the mainstream of American political discourse and participation. In this reading, the Christian right is not a threat to liberal and democratic values. Nancy Rosenblum would seem to support such an interpretation with her claim that social groups with illiberal aims and doctrines do not necessarily constitute a threat to pluralism and democracy. For Rosenblum, such groups stimulate the development of moral dispositions that—if not constructive to, at minimum—are not destructive to the wider democratic society. Even illiberal groups encourage the cultivation of cooperation, rule following, and norms that proscribe force.²⁴

However, there is a problem with the sanguine assessment of illiberal social groups: it relies on the existence of a democratic polity whose ideology and institutions are able and willing to protect the rights of those so disfavored.²⁵ Rosenblum is optimistic about the ability of a rights regime to empower individuals in the face of organized group disfavor. Interestingly, she does not take up the many faces of social, economic, and political exclusion suffered by queers. Her only reference to same-sex sexuality in *Membership and Morals* is one in which she notes that most violence motivated by antihomosexual bias is carried out by "unaffiliated individuals" rather than by members of groups.²⁶ But this narrow conception of what it means to belong to a group is surely troublesome, particularly

so in light of the coherent religious beliefs that survey research confirms motivate most antigay prejudice.²⁷ When organized Christian right groups and opinion leaders foment antigay beliefs and these beliefs influence the distribution of rights and public goods, we must subject any theory of the pro-social effects of group membership to some specific caveats.²⁸

There is a contending perspective on the relation of the Christian right to democratic norms and processes. In this view, the Christian right is not domesticated by its participation in democratic processes. It does not sublimate its activist energies into pro-social behavior. Instead, whatever the sources of its members' beliefs, the movement uses "bigoted discourse" to actively build and maintain antidemocratic values. Such discourse produces particular kinds of citizens.²⁹ One example of Anna Marie Smith's thesis is Dick Arme's apology for his 1995 reference to Representative Barney Franks (D-MA) as "Barney Fag." As a Republican elected official, Arme has distanced himself from the Christian right, but other examples of antigay speech are close at hand. A surprising example emerged recently at the 2006 Values Voter Summit, when Bishop Wellington Boone, of the Christian men's organization Promise Keepers, spoke of faggots and noted that gay people are "passionate at protecting their perversion."³⁰

Smith points out that Christian right activists seek to redefine the liberal democratic tradition to "center" their own antidemocratic and exclusionary politics. Of course, such centering can take place in a variety of ways, including apologies for impolitic speech and careful management of public discourse right from the start. In some cases, bigoted discourse may take the truly unexpected form of an outreach of compassion. Such therapeutic ideology is central to the ex-gay movement. The payoff of redefining the center is the right's ability to occupy that position, an imaginary tolerant political center. The effects of this redefinition are many, including the rightward shift of political culture, the obfuscation of the meaning of policies and their underlying motivations, and the transformation of important ideals such as equality and tolerance.³¹ The triumph of right-wing ideology is such that "the majority of the intolerant misidentify as tolerant."³² One result is the political construction of an imaginary figure of the celibate, nonpolitically active "good homosexual." Such a character props up fictive right-wing tolerance for a kind of citizen who cannot exist as simultaneously "good" and "homosexual."

In the course of its antigay projects, the Christian right crafts some messages that merely proscribe homosexuality and homosexuals. Other messages promote the Augustinian axiom to "hate the sin but love the sinner."³³ Yet others endorse compassion for people who struggle with unwanted same-sex desires. Smith is trenchant about the new right's attempts to recode intolerance as tolerance. However, the explanation for the mixed messages is not necessarily that the Christian right "contradicts itself." Christian right leaders cultivate distinct modes of address for their different audiences, born-again followers

and unbelievers as well as specific precincts of the conservative Christian movement rather than others. John C. Green confirms that different kinds of anti-gay groups specialize in different kinds of methods and messaging. So, for example, “general purpose groups” such as the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family pragmatically “down play hostility to homosexuals” and may even criticize others in the movement for their “strident antigay rhetoric.”³⁴

We can distinguish the Christian right from other groups on the political right by its complicated negotiation of the terrain of tolerance. On tolerance, the Christian right plays a double game, situating conservative Christians and their political positions as tolerant on one quite specific reading of this term and righteously intolerant at the same time. Indeed, especially on themes related to gender, sexuality, reproductive rights, and family organization, Christian conservatives socialize, cultivate, and defend a virtue of intolerance that can itself be located in various forms among the multiple political traditions in American history.³⁵

Being Intolerant

In the wake of the failure of the U.S. Senate to convict Bill Clinton for perjury for his testimony in the civil case of *Jones v. Clinton*, conservative activist and president of the Free Congress Foundation Paul Weyrich released an open letter to the conservative movement. Weyrich’s letter caused a sensation on the right. In it, Weyrich suggested that the time had come for people of faith to concede the “collapse of [American] culture” and the loss of the “culture war.” He suggested that although conservatives were able to get their candidates elected to office, they were not able to govern with a social conservative agenda; the cultural reality of Americans “tolerat[ing]” and “celebrat[ing]” the “intolerable” had finally precipitated the failure of politics. In such an atmosphere, he argued, conservatives can only withdraw from political attempts to reinstate “Judeo-Christian civilization” and separate themselves from corrupt institutions.³⁶

Among those on the Christian right who responded publicly to Weyrich were Pat Robertson and James Dobson, and both rejected Weyrich’s call for surrender. Robertson, as he so often does, responded in a press statement in which he denied that Christian conservatives were “ready to withdraw from the process we call democracy” and noted that the “future of America is at stake.”³⁷ The result of the 2004 presidential election vindicated the decision of Christian conservatives not to cede electoral politics to secular elites and members of mainline Protestant denominations. However, Weyrich’s preoccupation with the pernicious effects of tolerance, widely shared with other Christian conservatives, has not receded since the waning days of Clinton’s presidency.

Opinion leaders of the Christian right often fulminate against religious and other forms of toleration as ideals to be upheld in American society.

For many, toleration—and especially toleration mandated by U.S. law or the Constitution—is itself an abuse of political authority. As such, it is an invitation to Christian resistance. In fact, for the Christian right, toleration is complicated and the views of the movement deserve careful treatment. It is true that some Christian right thinkers do make a distinction that permits conservative Christians to claim tolerance as their own. These thinkers defend opposition to rights claims of disfavored minorities such as lesbians and gay men by contrasting different kinds of tolerance. In “traditional tolerance,” respect for others coexists with an underlying conviction that some beliefs and practices are simply wrong or sinful; public embrace of this virtue is integral to mainstream democratic politics. By contrast, “new tolerance” tries to obliterate the value distinctions between alternative beliefs, practices, and social arrangements.³⁸ “New tolerance” is dangerous to Christian faith, but “traditional tolerance,” which is tolerance properly understood, is not.

Lest this distinction be taken as academic, a longtime leader of the Christian right, Jerry Falwell, rejected “new tolerance,” and enacted that rejection in his positions on and relations with sexual minorities. In 1999, Falwell invited his ex-ghostwriter, Mel White, and two hundred LGBT members of Soulforce to take part in a dialogue with him about their issues. When Falwell later described the meeting to a *Washington Post* reporter he replied to the accusation that he did not listen to his guests in this way: “I didn’t invite them in to *listen* to them. I invited them in to *talk* to them.”³⁹ Falwell did not only rebuke the “folly of excessive tolerance” as so many conservatives do. Like many on the Christian right, he identified tolerance as itself the problem of our age, a problem so central to our contemporary condition that it can precipitate the most devastating attack on American territory.⁴⁰

Tim LaHaye also puts this conception of tolerance in the mouth of his new action hero, Michael Murphy, biblical archeologist. In LaHaye’s new, post-*Left Behind*, series, *Babylon Rising*, Murphy explains the problem of our absence of “moral absolutes” in a lecture to his undergraduate students:

The traditional definition of tolerance is living peaceably alongside others in spite of differences. But that view of tolerance has been twisted today to mean that everyone must accept the other person’s viewpoints without question because the truth is relative. What’s true for one person may not be true for another person, right? . . . That was exactly what was happening in the days of Noah and in the days of Lot. Everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. And it’s the same today. Society preaches tolerance of every viewpoint and everyone—with one big exception: those people who have strong religious faith. That’s where this double-standard

tolerance ends. . . . It makes me wonder if we are living in the days before the next coming judgment.⁴¹

Leaving aside the question of what this disquisition has to do with the teaching of archeology, it is useful to consider both the definition of tolerance that LaHaye posits and its relationship to other conservative Christian teachings on tolerance.

On the face of it, many political theorists agree with the framing of tolerance with which Christian conservatives often begin their considerations of the subject. Michael Walzer defines toleration as “the peaceful coexistence of groups of people with different histories, cultures and identities.” What Walzer means by toleration, however, goes well beyond this simple formulation. Walzer describes a number of attitudes, from the exhaustion that follows social strife to enthusiastic endorsement of difference, as forms of tolerance on a continuum. And he suggests that democratic societies become more stable “if people are further along on the continuum” toward enthusiasm about the cultural differences and ways of life they find around them.

Liberal democracies can be judged in part by how well they protect minority ways of life, which “will be democratically overruled on most matters of public culture” in the absence of strong protections such as civil rights and an independent judiciary. Finally, separation of church and state safeguards toleration because it keeps those with religious objections to nonconforming groups from acting on their objections. Religious groups that hope to enact their particular forms of intolerance into law are thus “barred from seizing state power” and “confined to civil society.”⁴² Amy Gutmann recommends this resolution, which she calls “two-way protection.” Two-way protection “recognizes that freedom of conscience can be justified only within the limits of nondiscriminatory laws and policies.”⁴³ Like LaHaye, the political theorists are interested in maintaining a society in which citizens can live “peaceably alongside others.”

One way in which Christian conservative elites and political theorists might find common ground is through the idea that tolerance is not the only value of democracies. One tradition in modern political thought, exemplified by Joseph Schumpeter, holds that most democratic citizens are little capable of tolerance and that democracy can survive this attitudinal defect. More important is the view that there are limits to tolerance, that in practice democratic societies make determinations about how to balance tolerance and other values in particular cases. What this suggests is that while for some tolerance is an absolute principle that can never be compromised, it is also possible to see a “distinction between tolerance as a principle and tolerance as prudential.”⁴⁴ This distinction is crucial to understanding a Christian conservative critique of tolerance. The case against tolerance of same-sex sexuality is prudential, focusing

on the harms—to marriage, the biblical family, individual salvation, and, ultimately, the nation—that follow from it. Just because such arguments are articulated in the public sphere does not, of course, mean that they become dominant in democratic discourse. Even if they don't, however, they are crucial in forging the frames of the discussion for Christian conservatives.

How useful is the version of tolerance put forth by LaHaye in broader Christian right discourse? In fact, Christian conservatives put forth disconcertingly few defenses of traditional tolerance in political debates about same-sex sexuality. More frequent is a rejection of tolerance even when the rhetoric and arguments on such issues are softened or framed in democratic terms. As examples, two quite different texts narrate the rejection of tolerance: Daniel Taylor's *Is God Intolerant? Christian Thinking about the Call for Tolerance*, and Ryan Dobson's *Be Intolerant: Because Some Things Are Just Stupid*. Taylor speaks to and for Christian conservatives in rejecting tolerance, the "pariah sin," "the only serious sin left."⁴⁵ Dobson, the son of Focus on the Family's James Dobson, speaks in a hip register to young Christians about tolerance: an "epidemic," a "broken philosophy," a "TUMOR on the American soul."

For Christian conservatives such as Taylor and Dobson, God does not call his people to tolerance, the requirement of a particular kind of secular social world, but to love; further, love is a "much higher standard."⁴⁶ The younger Dobson calls on his readers to "be intolerant—in love," and backs up his exhortation with stories of personal relationships in which he refused to compromise God's teachings when friends fell into sinful ways. Possibly overestimating his importance to "the world," the young Dobson draws this conclusion about the importance of intolerance in his life: "I am intolerant because I love. The world hates me because I love in this way, but I cannot stop. I dare not stop."⁴⁷ Pat Robertson proclaimed this principle in a reflection that has often been cited by his critics as a sign of his personal bigotry and intransigence rather than viewed in the context of a Christian conservative doctrine of tolerance: "[Y]ou're supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don't have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist. I can love the people who hold false opinions, but I don't have to be nice to them."⁴⁸ It is only "new tolerance" that demands being nice to the spirit of the Antichrist, and this Pat Robertson will not do. And where's the love? Robertson's, Taylor's, and Dobson's love is tough love, reproving love. Those who disagree may well ask: what can, or should, be done to those of whom we disapprove in the name of love?

The aspiration of Robertson's love is not far to seek: Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, queers, and many other sorts of misguided fellow citizens may all take the Roman Road that leads to salvation.⁴⁹ On that road, lesbians and gay men will surely renounce their sexuality and embrace celibacy. It is well for students of the Christian right to give appropriate attention, then,

to the role of love in social and political projects and forms of outreach. Love Won Out is the brand name of Focus on the Family's ex-gay project. To most observers, this brand name signals that love, not hate, can accomplish the transformation of sexuality and of lives. But it also signals something else, especially to those who are steeped in the language of conservative Christian politics: while one side of the political divide demands liberal tolerance toward those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, the other side exposes tolerance as misguided and demands reproving love instead. "Love" does double duty, as the flip side of both hate and tolerance. Such a binary suggests that hate and tolerance may well be more closely related than they at first appear, and this resemblance is easily suggested by Christian witnessing that identifies tolerance as the road to hell. The message is this: those who leave you in peace and seem to wish you well are not your friends but the enemies of your everlasting soul.

This precept is particularly easy to demonstrate with regard to same-sex sexuality. For conservative Christians, tolerance is inextricably linked to all the major cultural sins, but to homosexuality most of all. In *Is God Intolerant?* Taylor employs a number of social issues and personal anecdotes to illustrate his points, but same-sex sexuality epitomizes misplaced tolerance. The book's index lists homosexuality on two of the book's 128 pages, but a close reading of the text discloses that references to same-sex sexuality outpace references to all other modern sins that often serve as occasions for tolerant forbearance.⁵⁰ Taylor contrasts appropriate applications of intolerance, for example for homosexuality, with inappropriate applications of tolerance, for example when the German people allowed themselves to be governed by the Nazis. Could it be that Taylor is suggesting a parallel between Nazism and homosexuality? Not directly, but even if he did make this connection explicit he would be in good Christian right company, for this comparison is frequent and prosaic. Whether dealing with perpetrators of genocide or homosexuals, believers are called to love individuals while struggling against their evil fruits.

The exhortation to substitute love (a private form of relation) for toleration (a potentially public form of relation) has many potential venues and implications. It reveals the real problem with the fungibility of love for tolerance. The problem is not that such harshness violates tender liberal sensibilities. Instead, it is that this substitution of love for tolerance elides a distinction that is key to informed debates on the subject. This distinction is one between *tolerance* as a subjective state, belief system, attitude, conviction, or feeling and *toleration* as a specifically public virtue and organizing principle of regimes. Distinguishing tolerance and toleration in this way does not deny that there are connections between them. Many scholars concede, for example, that it is difficult to imagine a tolerant regime that does not command the support of some broad public for its functioning. However, normative political theory does not necessarily predicate the value of the public practice of toleration on the moral

impulses or beliefs of majorities. There are independent reasons to believe that toleration is a desirable value for the organization of collective life. Many of these arguments rely on some conception of human flourishing for which toleration is a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition.⁵¹

Daniel Taylor makes a pass at this distinction between tolerance and toleration, but it is unsatisfactory. Relying on seventeenth-century debates about religious toleration that are still relevant to us today, Taylor's distinction is historical and semantic: toleration is the early version of what is now called tolerance. In those early days, it referred to the idea that states should not force religious conformity to settle contentious social disputes. In his historical account, Taylor moves quickly from the religious wars of early modern Europe to the bargain struck with traditional believers in the twentieth century to "keep religion in the private sphere." In this analysis, early modern toleration—a matter of official state neutrality to religious dogmas—is simply irrelevant to contemporary debates about tolerance. This is so even though those who identify with "secular, progressive culture" keep raising the specter of religious wars to justify their own resistance to traditional religious convictions.⁵²

As both Taylor and Dobson suggest in their treatment of tolerance, Christian right leaders routinely instruct their followers that it is they—born-again, Bible-believing Christians—who are victims of intolerance. This reversal is not simply rhetorical but reflects a conviction that the descent of America into cultural evil sets the conditions for the triumph of Satan and the decimation of Christianity.⁵³ What is important for critics of the Christian right to remember is that in the final analysis tolerance is "not a human conspiracy," even though it is political liberals who represent the vice of tolerance. Rather, tolerance is a satanic "grand conspiracy."⁵⁴ It is Satan's way of working in the world through either duped or enthusiastic subjects. The outcomes of political struggles over tolerance have spiritual repercussions in a world that moves inexorably toward end-times and final reckonings.

Until the End of the World

Like other aspects of Christian right politics, opposition to toleration cannot be reduced to a single cause. As historians point out, both the forms of Christian conservative intolerance and the politics that flow from them change over time, reflecting different nuances, priorities, and, in some cases, different issues. For example, there is no longer an active Christian constituency for banning the production and sale of alcohol such as the one that existed in the early years of the twentieth century.⁵⁵ Without forgetting these differences, it is still possible to investigate the doctrinal and theological roots of contemporary Christian right political positions. To do so, we must look not only at publicly articulated positions and the reasons offered on their behalf. We must supplement this knowledge with other sources of in-group information. Sometimes we'll find

an identity or partial identity between these public and in-group sources. At other times the theological narratives and political goals directed to motivating and informing Christian conservatives open up strange new worlds of political reason for unbelievers.

One answer that illuminates much about Christian politics lies in contemporary end-times apocalyptic theology. Conservative Christians engage the political process for many reasons but for two reasons most of all: first is the mandate to save as many souls as possible before the end-time chronology commences; second is the desire to avert the possibility that “God would destroy our society for its wickedness.” In the course of her investigation of the history of the Christian right, Ruth Murray Brown hears variations on both themes from her conservative Christian respondents. She succinctly captures these two quite different purposes in a chapter entitled “Saved People Can Save the Country.”⁵⁶ Of the two purposes—saving people and saving the country—it is the second that is most frequently underestimated by outsiders to the Christian right. To understand it, we must understand at least the broad outlines of the study of last things.

Historically, Christian eschatology has taken a number of forms that include premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. These forms persist today as variations between the belief systems of denominations, doctrinal groups, churches, and individual believers. However, this undeniable variation could easily cloak the broad outlines of end-time belief in our time. The majority of Christian right leaders such as James Dobson, Billy Graham, and Tim LaHaye, as well as the next generation to which they are now passing the mantle of leadership, are dispensational premillennialists. The doctrine to which these believers adhere teaches that Jesus Christ’s triumphal return to earth will inaugurate the millennium on earth, which cannot begin until Jesus vanquishes the Antichrist and relegates Satan to the depths for a thousand years. The most popular version of this premillennial story today is found in the many pages (and over twelve volumes) of the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

The first book, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, begins dramatically with the Rapture, which entails the disappearance of born-again Christians all over the earth. The plot that unspools from this auspicious opening is familiar to conservative Christians, even if such details as the operations of the “Tribulation Force” cannot be inferred from the text of the book of Revelation. In the aftermath of the Rapture, social and political hopes darken, the Antichrist arises to rule the world, mass witnessing and conversions—including conversions of God’s people, the Jews—begin, and the world sinks into chaos as it moves toward Armageddon. The last battle between good and evil takes place on Middle Eastern soil. Prophecy-minded Christian conservatives scrutinize world events for insight into the unfolding of God’s final plan for his creation.

Although many conservative Christians today probably believe that this formula of the end-times in the Revelation of St. John is as old as Christianity itself, it is actually relatively new. Or, rather, it is both old and new, representing a reading of eschatology that was condemned by the early church and then experienced a renaissance in the mid-nineteenth century. Our dominant “fundamentalist apocalyptic” is pretribulation (“pretrib”) premillennial dispensationalism, the brainchild of an Englishman named John Nelson Darby.⁵⁷ Pretrib premillennialists expect born-again Christians to be removed from earth—“raptured”—before the inception of the seven-year “tribulation” marked by the reign of the Antichrist and well before the triumphal return of Jesus that will follow.⁵⁸ As Paul Boyer relates, Darby did not manufacture this belief system from whole cloth; in fact, major dimensions of it preceded him in the Millerite movement of the 1830s and 1840s and in other popular preachings and enthusiasms. However, it was Darby who formulated the most durable of the premillennialisms when he added the idea of a literal gathering of believers into the air, the Rapture now regarded to have been foretold by Paul. There have been many variations—pretrib, midtrib, and posttrib—of the Rapture time line since it was first set out, but Darby’s version, in which believers are raptured before the suffering of the tribulation begins, has stood the test of time. Darby was not a popular preacher. Most Christians learned his interpretation of the end-time in the decades after he expounded it through other proponents or through the popular Scofield Bible, first published in 1909.⁵⁹

The final piece of pretrib premillennialism is the centrality of the Antichrist, the leading man of the end-time. According to conservative Christian eschatology, the Antichrist will come to prominence during the first half of the tribulation and seize power at its mid-point. A man who preaches peace, he will inspire trust, gain control, and then unleash unprecedented evil on the people who remain on earth. Speculations about the identity of the Antichrist go back to the earliest days of the Christian church. A surprising number of prominent modern men (though never women) have been identified by their contemporaries as potential claimants to the position. These include George III of England, Thomas Jefferson, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Mikhail Gorbachev (that satanic birthmark!), Sun Myung Moon, Henry Kissinger, John F. Kennedy (Catholic!), Ronald Reagan, Saddam Hussein, and Bill Clinton, as well as many others. In addition to these particular individuals, the pope has been a contender for the role of Antichrist to many—not any particular pope, though some have been suspected more than others, but “a” or “some” pope.

The idea that the leader who arises to become the Antichrist will come from the Holy See dies hard. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have been given credit in some quarters for not selecting a pope as their fictional Antichrist. Indeed, the authors even rapture the last pope to occupy the office before the Antichrist arises. However, other astute readers point out that the raptured pope

seems to have become a Protestant shortly before the saved disappear from the earth. And the execrable Cardinal Peter Matthews who takes his place at the helm of Enigma One World Church in Rome is evidence for the continuing anti-Catholicism of conservative Protestant premillennialism.⁶⁰ There is an irony to the immediacy of the setting of LaHaye and Jenkins's story: Those conservative Christian fans who hold that the well-respected Pope John Paul II may be the last pontiff before the rise of Antichrist will have to reckon with the disconcerting elevation of the conservative Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI. This development seems to portend a delay in the premillennial drama.

In addition to the widely shared expectation that the pope will be the Antichrist, there has also been some support for a male homosexual in this role. Queers usually figure in conservative Christian eschatology because they practice a kind of sin that prefigures and provokes the end-times. But Paul Boyer calls attention to same-sex sexuality in a different way when he points out a not uncommon reading of a prophesy in Daniel 11:37: "Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all."⁶¹

In *Left Behind*, LaHaye and Jenkins are evasive on this point of the Antichrist's sexuality as on their own orientation to the Catholic church (aka the religious infrastructure of the Antichrist's rule). First, it is arguable that, although Antichrist Nicolae Carpathia has a female partner in the story, he has little regard for the desire of women. More damning is the narrative of Nicolae's genesis, now told in a prequel to the original series. It turns out that Nicolae has two daddies. One, Carpathia, provides his surname as well as his wife, Marilena, as the "vessel" who will give birth to the future Antichrist. But Nicolae is genetically related only to his fathers; this "opposite god," the "victory of the people," is a direct and physical product of homosexuals. Cleverly, he is also the product of homosexuality because his male biological parents are lovers.⁶² Even the futuristic science behind this plot sends a didactic message about the nature-perverting consequences of reproductive technologies in the wrong ungodly hands.

In the course of this story, LaHaye and Jenkins establish a chain of associations with evil that includes humanism, academia, the occult, and possibly even multilingualism. The Carpathias are scholars of classical languages; we should have known something was awry when we realized they speak Russian and, more disturbing, *French*. But the key signifier in this chain is homosexuality.

Postmillennial teachings provide a counterpoint to the premillennial end-time narrative. In the postmillennial plan, Jesus will return to earth to close a millennial period of peace only after the world has been reconciled through Christian interventions. For postmillennialists, the reign of Jesus and the vanquishing of evil will occur after Christians have reclaimed the earth for Christianity. When compared with premillennialism, postmillennialism is,

therefore, “hopeful, reformist.”⁶³ It has been a popular belief system during optimistic periods of American history, and it consistently has been eclipsed by premillennialism when the nation is at war. Contradictory political commitments arise from the two ways of interpreting scriptural prophecies concerning the end of the world. Between these two perspectives, it is the minority post-millennialism that appears to provide more support for coercive efforts to remake societies and governments in the image of conservative Christianity.⁶⁴ God is waiting for his people to act and create the preconditions for his return. Historically and theoretically, the majority premillennial perspective underwrites a more apolitical and isolationist theology. The premillennial Christian church would appear content to save individual souls and wait for the imminent Rapture of believers.

That our current premillennialism does not function in this way requires explanation, and students of the Christian right have taken on this task. A variety of explanations have been put forward. It is no doubt true that the triumph of pretrib premillennialism is multidetermined; a variety of theological and other components constitute this belief system.

Rapture Ready

One explanation for the postmillennial political quality of our present premillennialism is that it contains residues of the postmillennialism that is also common to our religious history. In this account, the Christian right seems to have crafted from the two opposing interpretations of pre- and postmillennialism a “cloudy synthesis,” a *de facto* consensus that born-again Christians are responsible for preparing a Christian nation and world before Jesus returns.⁶⁵

In her ethnographic account of the evolution of the contemporary Christian right, Susan Friend Harding fills in some details of this synthesis. Its theological and political foundations are found in Bible preaching and prophesy of the 1970s and 1980s. Harding finds in these sources and in their subsequent effects the development of a new “mode of millennial dreaming” in which Christian political action expanded even as dispensational premillennialism was, at least theoretically, retained intact. An important clue to this reconciliation between political action and premillennial pessimism lies in an idea of the theologian Francis Schaeffer that is later picked up by Tim LaHaye. This is the notion of a “pre-Tribulation tribulation.”⁶⁶ The pretrib trib is a time of liberal triumph and moral decline that, should it occur, will foreshadow the real tribulation. Most important, Christians awaiting rapture will be forced to live through this time that Harding dubs the “little tribulation.”⁶⁷ Clearly, the hope of avoiding a tribulation of any sort makes political activism worthwhile for Christian conservatives who might otherwise concentrate on other works.