

## The Anti-gay Rights Movement in the United States: The Framing of Religion

AHOURA AFSHAR\*

### Abstract

Like many movements advocating the human rights of a ‘minority’ group, the gay rights movement in the United States has faced severe opposition. This article examines whether a close correlation exists between the anti-gay rights movement and conservative Christianity. The Religious Right has been a vocal and powerful force opposing equal rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) populations. Using the theoretical concept of *framing*, this article shows that the Religious Right has been active in constructing conservative Christian values and beliefs in order to mobilize voters and activists against the gay rights movement. The historical background of the gay and the anti-gay rights movements will be examined in addition to the change in the anti-gay rights rhetoric and framing strategies. It is argued that hostility towards the gay rights movement has grown as opposition to other minority groups has become socially unacceptable, while the same line of framing strategies persist in the rhetoric of the Religious Right. The arguments of anti-gay rights activists are categorized within two main claims: one, homosexuality is a sin, and two, homosexuality is a threat to society. Various framing strategies are used in order to mobilize against gay rights. Further, as the Religious Right works to oppose gay rights, more liberal religious groups have been less active in making their case for equality, diversity, and welcoming LGBT members. Yet public opinion polls in the US show increasing acceptance of gay rights. The gay rights movement can take advantage of the central role of religion in American society through framing religious values for the *promotion* of equality, tolerance, and respect.

### 1. Introduction

*Human rights* are by definition rights that every person is entitled to by virtue of being a human, without any further qualifications. Although there are certain subcategories in human rights, for example, women’s rights and children’s rights, they still comprise human rights. In this sense, human rights also encompass gay rights. ‘*Gay rights*’ in this article is another term for ‘human rights of the homosexual’ in its broadest sense, including the entire lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) populations, and, in some cases, people with HIV/AIDS, although in the discourse of Christian conservatives gay men seem to dominate the debates. Gay rights do not comprise a new set of rights. Much like the women’s rights and the civil rights movements preceding it, the gay rights movement in the United States is primarily fighting to ensure the implementation of non-discrimination policy – in particular, gay rights activists work to ensure that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression becomes unacceptable and illegal.

---

\* MSc in Human Rights, London School of Economics

The anti-gay rights movement, on the other hand, propagates discrimination. This includes sodomy laws (which are discriminatory on the basis of sex and sexual orientation), and discrimination in various spheres such as employment, marriage, child adoption and guardianship, inheritance, health care, and education, in violation of the fundamental principle of equality before the law. For instance, the right to education may be infringed if a child has to drop out of school due to harassment and bullying because of perceived sexual orientation. A gay child's mental health is also at risk if taught homosexuality is a sin. Moreover, since different states have different protections regarding civil unions and child adoption, a homosexual couple's right to freedom of movement is violated since they cannot enjoy the same legal protections in all states.

Opposition to gay rights in the United States is closely correlated to the Religious Right.<sup>1</sup> Christianity has not always been as hostile towards homosexuality as it is today in the United States. Even at present, only *some* Christian denominations are categorically against gay rights, and their claims and arguments are contested by some other denominations. Nevertheless, the Religious Right arguably remains the most fundamental basis for and the loudest voice within the anti-gay rights movement. This paper argues that in the United States, the anti-gay rights movement can enjoy a relative advantage to the gay rights movement, since the former can more easily use religion and religious beliefs and values to frame their actions and mobilize potential participants.

The Christian Right is defined as '[A] social movement located principally among evangelicals, dedicated to restoring traditional values in public policy.... it exercises influence in national politics, especially by mobilizing evangelical voters on behalf of Republican candidates.'<sup>2</sup> Members of the Religious Right are generally evangelical Christians who have had a 'born again' personal conversion experience and believe it is crucial to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Many of them also believe that the Bible is the literal word of God. They have 'traditional values', particularly regarding social issues such as gay rights, abortion, teaching creationism, birth control, the death penalty, pornography and school prayer.<sup>3</sup> Conservative Christian organizations include Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, Americans for the Republic, Family Research Council, Moral Majority and Christian Civic League, although churches and evangelical ministers have also become extremely important.<sup>4</sup> The television programme *Club 700* and the magazine *Christian Voice* are crucial media vehicles of the Christian Right.

The Religious Right has been framing different values and beliefs against gays and their human rights. Among them are claims that homosexuality is immoral, unnatural and against God's plan, that homosexuality and paedophilia are connected, and that gays pose a threat to society in general. Many of these claims are backed by conservative religious doctrines, while religious denominations that are more liberal and inclusive have been

---

<sup>1</sup> For a list of references see D. Herman, 'The Gay Agenda is the Devil's Agenda: the Christian Right's Vision and the Role of the State' in C. Rimmerman, K. Wald and C. Wilcox, *The Politics of Gay Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 139-60, at 139.

<sup>2</sup> J. Green et al., *Religion and the Culture Wars: Dispatches from the Front*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1996), at 1.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Guth et al., 'Onward Christian Soldiers: Religious Activist Groups in American Politics' in J. Green et al., n. 2 above, 62-85, at 76 and 65.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Guth, 'The Politics of the Christian Right' in J. Green et al., n. 2 above, 7-29, at 18.

overshadowed in the public debate by fundamentalist Christians. As such, henceforth the term 'religion' refers to Christianity. The Religious Right, conservative Christianity and fundamentalist Christianity are used interchangeably.

This paper will examine the meaning of 'framing,' the relevance of religion, and the use of religion in framing strategies by the Religious Right within the anti-gay movement. The next section argues that fundamentalist Christians' hostility toward homosexuality has increased. The following section examines how anti-gay activists frame religion as a core anti-gay value and use their conservative religious *beliefs* as *facts* to show the alleged harms of homosexuality and the way it threatens the integrity of American society. This will be followed by a discussion of the way in which liberal Christians allow fundamentalists to dominate the debate on religion and homosexuality. Finally, the paper will conclude with changing trends in public opinion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Christianity has not always been used against gays and their human rights. The anti-gay movement, however, *frames* conservative Christian beliefs and values in order to oppose gay rights. According to Mayer Zald, 'frames are the specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behaviour and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action.'<sup>5</sup> Framing signifies how meaning is attached to events, and how that can help to mobilize people to participate in a social movement. Usually more than one strategy or type of framing exists within a movement. Therefore, when speaking of framing in a movement, the concept should be understood broadly, so as to leave space for variations in framing. Religion does not have a unifying voice that speaks for everybody within it. However, there is still a certain degree of *concurrency* in conservative religious positions on homosexuality, specifically, the positions that view homosexuality as a sinful lifestyle posing a threat to society. Despite the variance in hostility towards gay rights, some of these basic themes in anti-gay rights framings still occur.

Different frames achieve different degree of success. Frames that make the strongest linkage between their ideas and more general values and beliefs are more successful. Such frames 'resonate' more, i.e. they make such strong connections between their ideas and broader cultural values that their claims appear natural.<sup>6</sup> Since broad social values and beliefs are culturally determined, the cultural context of a movement is essential to understanding framing strategies of a social movement in a particular society. Christianity is a significant component of American culture. Unlike the situation in many Western European countries, religion remains a central part of life for a great number of Americans.<sup>7</sup> As such, religious groups constitute 'fertile soil' for social movements.<sup>8</sup> The anti-gay rights

---

<sup>5</sup> M. Zald, 'Culture, ideology, and strategic framing' in D. McAdam, J. McCarthy, and M. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 261-74, at 262.

<sup>6</sup> M. Ferree et al., *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), at 70.

<sup>7</sup> M. Zald and J. McCarthy, 'Religious Groups as Crucibles of Social Movements' in Zald and McCarthy (eds.), *Social Movements in an Organizational Society*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987), at 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, at 67.

movement, in particular, has benefited from the central role of religion in the United States, compared to their Western European counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

While the centrality of religion facilitates the use of religious values for the anti-gay rights movement, the social context is not a sufficient prerequisite for the *emergence* of a movement. In the political process model, Doug McAdam recognizes three conditions as necessary for a social movement to emerge. These are organizational strengths, expanding political opportunity, and cognitive liberation.<sup>10</sup> The Religious Right anti-gay movement enjoys a high level of organization and networks.<sup>11</sup> Many followers give financial support to the cause of the Religious Right. In Colorado, in 1992, the victory of Amendment 2, which repealed non-discrimination laws on the basis of sexual orientation, demonstrated the ample resources of the Religious Right, particularly compared to the limited networks and funds of the gay rights movement.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the level of organization and coordination within the Religious Right anti-gay movement has increased. Many groups have combined resources, including finances, to fight gay marriage.<sup>13</sup> This also points to the issue of networks and their importance for a social movement, as well as their role in the Religious Right anti-gay movement – for example, in the form of churches and religious gatherings.

Not only does the Religious Right enjoy a high level of organizational strength, they also benefit from expanding political opportunity. The Christian Right enjoyed ‘spectacular growth’ recently.<sup>14</sup> The number of fundamentalist Christian churches has multiplied. Moreover, the Bush administration, with its agenda to define marriage as a heterosexual institution, has only increased their political opportunities. The importance of mobilization against gay rights has also arisen. Since the 1980s, anti-gay activities have been central to Religious Right political views.<sup>15</sup> The political opportunities for conservative Christianity have expanded as a result of its growth and support from conservative administrations.

McAdam later introduces the notion of threat to the political process model. Since there are few obstacles to mobilization in a democratic country, a threat to values and the interests of a group can trigger public action and expand political opportunity.<sup>16</sup> The gay rights movement threatens fundamentalist religious beliefs because it provides an alternative lifestyle. This threat has increased because of the progress of the gay rights movement in ‘winning’ their rights. Therefore, the threat posed by gay rights and gay rights activists also constitutes a vehicle for the Religious Right to mobilize people.

---

<sup>9</sup> C. Rimmerman, *From Identity to Politics: the Lesbian and Gay Movement in the United States*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), at 125.

<sup>10</sup> D. McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), at 40.

<sup>11</sup> See C. Rimmerman, n. 9 above, 121-154.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, at 147.

<sup>13</sup> See for example The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, ‘Religion’ in *Issues*, available at <http://www.thetaskforce.org/theissues/issue.cfm?issueID=28>

<sup>14</sup> R. Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), at 130.

<sup>15</sup> D. Herman, *The Anti-gay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), at 5.

<sup>16</sup> D. McAdam, ‘Revisiting the US Civil Rights Movement: toward a More Synthetic Understanding of the Origins of Contention’ in J. Goodwin and J. Jasper (eds.), *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 201-32, at 205.

The various religious congregations [in the United States] include many who are reacting against what they see as the increasing secularization of modern life. In this worldview, their adversaries' views on the role of women, homosexuality, prayer in schools, premarital sex, and abortion are viewed as symptoms of secular humanism, a more fundamental problem of moral decay.<sup>17</sup>

Hence homosexuality poses a threat to the role of religion in life not only as immoral behaviour in itself, but also as a part of the greater secularization of society. In addition to the threat it faces from the gay rights movement, the political opportunities of fundamentalist Christianity constitute the second condition for collective action in a social movement.

Changes in the political atmosphere, networks, and organizational strengths do not automatically lead to collective action. For action to take place people need to define political changes as *opportunities* and make use of their resources to mobilize. Cognitive liberation, the third element in the political process model, is the process through which subjective meanings are attached to objective realities in a manner that ignites action.<sup>18</sup> It is in this respect that framing becomes of particular importance since it is through framing that potential activists give meaning to what goes on in the world around them, interpret political changes as opportunities, and set an agenda for action.

Framing also moulds the interpretation of grievances. Again, the presence of grievances does not of itself cause action. Grievances should be interpreted in a way that makes action desirable, possible, and urgent. Framing contributes to the emergence of a movement because it helps to attach meaning to circumstances. Framing serves to mobilize as many people as possible by giving certain meaning to certain phenomena 'in a way that convinces a wide and diverse audience of the necessity for and utility of collective attempts to redress [social problems]'.<sup>19</sup> Framing also aims to convince people of the *urgency* of the problem. The 'risks of inaction' have to be accentuated: 'If we do not act now, the situation will not remain the same but will become more and more difficult to change.'<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is important not only to send the message that change is possible, but also that it is urgently needed. Anti-gay activists have argued repeatedly that society is under invasion by gays and that if people do not defeat homosexuals, they themselves will be defeated.

In short, the success of framing strategies leads to cognitive liberation. Cognitive liberation encourages the rise of organizational networks. This, together with political opportunities, sparks the Religious Right social movement to fight against the human rights of the homosexual. As a means of interpreting social events in order to emphasize the possibility, desirability, and urgency of action,<sup>21</sup> framing processes can be stratified into different types. Snow and others recognize four types of framing. Frame bridging is 'the linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem'.<sup>22</sup> Frame amplification entails identifying and

---

<sup>17</sup> M. Ferree et al., n. 6 above, at 77.

<sup>18</sup> See D. McAdam, n. 10 above, at 48.

<sup>19</sup> J. McCarthy, J. Smith and M. Zald, 'Accessing public, media, electoral, and governmental agendas' in D. McAdam, J. McCarthy, and M. Zald (eds.), n. 5 above, 291-311, at 291.

<sup>20</sup> W. Gamson, and D. Meyer, 'Framing political opportunity' in D. McAdam, J. McCarthy, and M. Zald (eds.), n. 5 above, 275-90, at 286.

<sup>21</sup> M. Zald, n. 5 above, at 268.

<sup>22</sup> D. Snow et al., 'Frame Alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation' (1986) 51 *American Sociology Review*, 464-81, at 467.

intensifying the importance of a value or belief in order to mobilize.<sup>23</sup> Frame extension works to ‘enlarge [the movement’s] adherent pool by portraying its objectives or activities as attending to or being congruent with the values or interests of potential adherents’.<sup>24</sup> Finally, frame transformation is used when the movement’s goals and objectives do not connect with values of the society and in such a case new values and beliefs should be created.<sup>25</sup> The Religious Right most often adopts the first two types of framing – bridging and amplification – and occasionally frame extension, in order to mobilize against gay rights and homosexuality. Prior to the discussion of their framing methods, attention must be given to the central role of religion in the anti-gay rights movement.

### 3. Historical Background

Studies show that culture and context are significant factors in explaining the emergence of a social movement and particularly its framing. Likewise, understanding the anti-gay rhetoric and framing of the Christian Right is contingent on the social changes that preceded it, namely the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, and the sexual revolution. These formed the context in which the gay rights movement and the anti-gay rights movement came into existence. These series of social changes influenced, threatened, and altered the social scene, especially the dominant place of religion in everyday life. The gradual change in public perception of the role of women, abortion, and sexuality has posed a threat to conservative religious beliefs in the United States since the 1960s.<sup>26</sup> The emergence of the gay rights movement presents an *additional* force and threat that the Religious Right had to fight.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to current sharp attacks on gay rights, Christianity has not always been as hostile to homosexuality as it is in the United States today.<sup>28</sup> In 1969, an editorial in *Christianity Today* (a mainstream conservative Christian journal) points out that ‘grace is for the homosexual too’ and while stating that the ‘church had better make it plain that Christianity and homosexuality [are] incompatible,’ adds that the church also ‘proclaims deliverance for the homosexual from his sinful habit through faith in Jesus Christ’.<sup>29</sup>

Further recognition of the rights of homosexuals appear at later dates. In 1974, Scanzoni writes about the goodness of same-sex *friendship*, and asserts that ‘it seems especially regrettable that so much homophobia exists among evangelicals.’<sup>30</sup> Henry, in 1980, declares that legislation ‘should preserve the civil rights of all, including homosexuals, but not approve and advance immoral lifestyles’.<sup>31</sup> Minnery states: ‘Christians won’t get through to homosexuals until they overcome their understandable fears and learn to accept them as

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., at 469

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., at 472.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., at 473.

<sup>26</sup> See J. Green, ‘Anti-gay: Varieties of Opposition to Gay Rights’ in C. Rimmerman, K. Wald and C. Wilcox, n. 1 above, 121-38, at 124.

<sup>27</sup> See D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 86.

<sup>28</sup> See U. Vaid, *Virtual Equality: the mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), at 17.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in U. Vaid, *ibid.*, at 47.

<sup>30</sup> Scanzoni, (*Christianity Today*), *ibid.*, at 49.

<sup>31</sup> Henry, (*Christianity Today*), *ibid.*, at 51.

people and take the time to develop their trust through love.<sup>32</sup> The disapproving rhetoric now, however, is strikingly different from the more open recognition of past attitudes of the Christian Right.

Such inconsistency shows the anti-gay movement's resilience and its ability to alter tactics and strategies to suit the present political and social circumstances. As such, it has contributed to the success of the anti-gay movement.<sup>33</sup> Inconsistency is also a result of changes in the social and political atmosphere in the United States. Many claims made today against gays are similar to rhetoric against Jews and Communists in the past. In certain respects animosity against gays and gay rights has roots in anti-Semitism and anti-Communism. As anti-Communism became less important and anti-Semitism less acceptable, the anti-gay rights movement has become more prominent, while using similar rhetoric and argumentation.

With the background of the Cold War, fundamentalist Christians have not shied away from portraying homosexuality as a satanic evil force, going so far as to liken it to Nazism and such 'un-American' ideology as Communism, and in this way appealing to American patriotism. Common statements include 'the homosexual blitzkrieg has been better planned and better executed than Hitler's.... we don't even know we've been conquered.'<sup>34</sup> Despite the obvious contradiction, claims have been made that many Nazis were gay.<sup>35</sup> In 1994, Pat Robertson incited with: 'Many of those people involved with Adolf Hitler were satanists. Many of them were homosexuals. The two seem to go together.'<sup>36</sup> He comfortably ignored the fact that gays were among the victims of Nazism. This kind of framing also works in the service of the anti-gay movement by using 'the ultimate symbol of political repression'.<sup>37</sup> Kevin Tebedo of Colorado for Family Values has argued that 'the politics of homosexuality is Marxism-Leninism,'<sup>38</sup> which is itself 'in the service of Satan'.<sup>39</sup> Communism was seen as evil and anti-Christian because it was an alternative to the Christian religion and way of life.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the anti-gay rights movement argues that homosexuality is anti-Christian because it provides an alternative lifestyle.

According to Chris Bull and John Gallagher, early Christian Right groups were driven by anti-Semitism and anti-Communism. Nevertheless, in the 1970s they slowly turned their hostility to gay rights, partially because anti-Semitism was no longer socially acceptable.<sup>41</sup> Although different from Communists, Jews were thought of as pathetic, sinful people who had killed Jesus Christ and rejected the true message of God.<sup>42</sup> Gays too are portrayed as pathetic, living a lifestyle that is harmful to themselves as well as to the larger

---

<sup>32</sup> Minnery, (*Christianity Today*), *ibid.*, at 51-2.

<sup>33</sup> See C. Rimmerman, n. 9 above, at 147.

<sup>34</sup> Dannemeyer in D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 64.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, at 90.

<sup>36</sup> C. Bull and J. Gallagher, *Perfect Enemies: the Battle between The Religious Right and the Gay Movement*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., (Lanham: Madison Books, 1996), at 276-7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, at 277.

<sup>38</sup> In D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 87.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, at 88.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, at 38.

<sup>41</sup> C. Bull and J. Gallagher, *Perfect Enemies: the Battle between The Religious Right and the Gay Movement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Lanham: Madison Books, 2001), at 7.

<sup>42</sup> D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 38-41.

society. ‘Homosexual relations are almost never lasting, and the dominant mood in “gay” bars or in the “cruising” areas of our cities is one of loneliness and compulsive searching.’<sup>43</sup> Anita Bryant, in her *Save Our Children* campaign, asserted: ‘We shall continue to seek help and change for homosexuals, whose sick and sad values belie the word “gay” which they pathetically use to cover their unhappy lives.’<sup>44</sup>

Claims that homosexuality is a sickness and poses a threat to society (particularly to children) are compatible with earlier anti-Semitic claims. Jews used to be portrayed as filthy and sick people and particularly threatening to children.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, gays are viewed as sick, immoral, and determined to recruit children.<sup>46</sup> These are examples of frame extension, i.e. demonstrating the objective of a social movement in a way that appears compatible with the values and beliefs of the general public. For many, homosexuality may not have been an important issue, but by connecting anti-gay rhetoric to anti-Semitism and anti-Communism, conservative Christians increased the pool of potential adherents. By likening gays to Jews and Communists, anti-gay activists attempted to extend their rhetoric and anti-gay movement to a broader range of prejudice such as fear of communism, and aversion to the Jews.

The fact that hostility toward the LGBT community in the Christian Right has been growing is an essential point that cannot be underestimated. It disproves the argument that ‘moral’ values are constant and invariable, and demonstrates that the religious conservatives have changed their position on homosexuality and have become increasingly antagonistic, especially as explicit opposition to other minorities has become socially unacceptable. The next section examines how moral values are used (and abused) to mobilize anti-gay activism.

#### 4. Empirical Data

The rhetoric and reasoning of the anti-gay rights movement can be divided into two basic framing categories. The first one refers to the immorality of homosexuality. Since the bulk of such arguments is based on the Scriptures and people’s relationship to God, it can be argued that such arguments mostly target Christians, although this does not necessarily exclude others. The second category of framing strategy concerns the threat that gays allegedly pose to society in general. Here the target is any member of society. Values such as family, children, and health are used in order to mobilize people against homosexuality and gay rights.

##### 4.1 ‘Homosexuality is wrong’

There is an abundance of rhetoric describing homosexuality as a sin against human nature. Some goes back to the story of the creation of Adam and Eve. ‘When God created Adam “he didn’t get Adam another guy. He didn’t get Adam three guys. He got Adam a woman”.’<sup>47</sup> It has also been pointed out that God created Eve and Adam, not Eve and

---

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 46.

<sup>44</sup> A. Bryant in *Wikipedia*, available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita\\_Bryant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_Bryant).

<sup>45</sup> D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, at 85.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson in C. Rimmerman, n. 9 above, at 152.



Madam.<sup>48</sup> ‘The Christian Right has been effective over the years in promoting the message that “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” should be the norm in any decent society.’<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it should be obvious that God has *not* created homosexuality, and consequently homosexuality works against the plan God has for humanity.

A natural implication of such an argument is that people cannot be gay by birth. If God did not create homosexuality, it cannot be inherent in people. Gays *choose* to be gay, and it is because of their wrong choice that they are condemned. Therefore, many conservative Christian groups have opened clinics where gays are supposed to be cured of homosexuality.<sup>50</sup> One such organization is Desert Stream (under Exodus International), led by Andrew Comiskey, whose book ‘*Pursuing Sexual Wholeness*’ provides an overview of a biblical approach to the healing of male and female homosexuality.<sup>51</sup> This book reports that about half of the people under such treatment make considerable progress in becoming heterosexual.<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Satinover also talks of homosexuality and how it can be healed. While likening it to alcoholism,<sup>53</sup> he also asserts that gays are to blame for the epidemic of AIDS.<sup>54</sup>

There are more essential inferences from the argument on creation and homosexuality. If homosexuality is inherent, similar to sex and race, then legal demands for equality can be supported by the precedence of the women’s rights movement and the civil rights movement. ‘Constitutionally, the more sexual orientation could be held to “be like” race, or even sex, the more likely lesbians and gay men would be found to deserve constitutional rights.’<sup>55</sup> If homosexuality is seen to be innate, gays and lesbians may receive more sympathy from the general public.<sup>56</sup>

To counteract the theory that homosexuality is inherent, *Christianity Today* asserts that ‘homosexuality is contrary to nature, and that it is part of degeneration of man that guaranteed ultimate disaster in the life and the life to come’ and that ‘those who practice it shall not inherit the kingdom of God.’<sup>57</sup> By portraying homosexuality as a choice, the Religious Right opposes the gay rights movement’s argument that gays deserve the same rights as everybody else, just like women and ethnic minorities.

Another important aspect of the argument against homosexuality as simply wrong springs from images of gay sexual acts reflected by anti-gay activists. ‘Sodomy, no matter how it is legitimized, is still a filthy practice and at odds with human anatomy.’<sup>58</sup> In *The Gay Agenda* film series (anti-gay videos) [p]enises, erect and otherwise, are depicted graphically, as

---

<sup>48</sup> D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 71.

<sup>49</sup> C. Rimmerman, n. 9 above, at 150.

<sup>50</sup> D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 69.

<sup>51</sup> J. Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Hamewith Books, 1996), at 202.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, at 203.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, at 197-200.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, at 14-17.

<sup>55</sup> D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 72.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 47.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in D. Herman, n. 15 above,, at 56.

is any sexual act the camera can get close enough to film.<sup>59</sup> Gay sex is portrayed as perverse, promiscuous, and appalling.<sup>60</sup> Here the anti-gay rights activists exploit selective images of gay sexual acts, generally filmed at gay pride parades, in order to perpetuate the idea that homosexuality is immoral and at odds with human nature. Another reason that Christian conservatives oppose homosexual acts is that it is sex without procreation.<sup>61</sup> Gay sex is also seen as a threat to family since procreative sexuality is viewed as the basis of the family.<sup>62</sup> However, since heterosexual sex is also often not procreative, partially because of birth control devices, the use of such frames has declined in recent years.

The claim that homosexuality is unnatural and immoral is a prime example of frame bridging. Frame bridging involves connecting two sets of values or beliefs that are compatible but not interrelated. Since religious values, such as the story of creation, procreative sex, and a limited set of permissible sexual acts, are significant for conservative believers, the Religious Right focuses its appeals on influencing these people. There is no inherent connection between such values and hostility toward gays and gay rights. Nevertheless, through frame bridging, the two become linked. Consequently, anti-gay rights activists argue that anyone who holds such values should mobilize against gay rights.

Frame bridging also takes place when homosexuality is connected to social taboos, even though no logical connection exists here either. For example, certain arguments maintain that if homosexuals are granted rights, then prostitution, bestiality, and incest should also be legalized.<sup>63</sup> In the campaign of *Colorado for Family Values*, homosexuality was compared to ‘murder, theft, fraud, necrophilia, bestiality, and pedophilia’.<sup>64</sup> While these have nothing in common, from the point of the Religious Right they are all immoral deeds, and all equally evil. Such thinking is also useful in frame bridging.

Richard Viguerie, an anti-gay activist, labelled non-discrimination on the basis of sexuality as a ‘special right’ to which the rest of the population is not entitled.<sup>65</sup> Of course, heterosexuals do not need to be protected against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It has also been argued that discrimination against gays is not a problem because religion by definition is discriminatory.<sup>66</sup> Attempts to disseminate and propagate such beliefs are also vehicles of framing in order to mobilize third parties and invite them to be active in the anti-gay movement. The belief that homosexuality is wrong has been recognized as the most common grievance in the anti-gay movement.<sup>67</sup> The claim that homosexuality is wrong constitutes the first basic framing category of anti-gay rights rhetoric. The second category involves the belief that homosexuality poses a threat to the general public.

---

<sup>59</sup> D. Herman, *The Anti-gay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), at 81.

<sup>60</sup> Grant and Horne, *ibid.*, at 81.

<sup>61</sup> J. Escoffier, *American Homo: Community and Perversity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), at 218.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> See A. Bryant in *Wikipedia*, available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita\\_Bryant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_Bryant); A. Bryant in C. Rimmerman, n. 9 above, at 128; Schlessinger in ‘Dr. Laura on... (Excerpts from *The Dr. Laura Program*)’ *The Advocate*, 15 Feb 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Niblock in D. Richards, *Identity and the case for gay rights: race, gender, religion as analogies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), at 123.

<sup>65</sup> See C. Rimmerman, n. 9 above, at 126-7.

<sup>66</sup> See D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 48.

<sup>67</sup> J. Green n. 24 above, at 124.

## 4.2 'Homosexuality is a threat'

The anti-gay rights activists describe homosexuality as dangerous. They attribute AIDS and paedophilia to homosexuality and by so doing draw attention to the threat gay rights pose to society. As early as 1972 the Christian Right had connected homosexuality to child molestation.<sup>68</sup> According to their claims, gays 'target children, hoping to seduce them into a life of depravity and disease'.<sup>69</sup> Some of them argue that since homosexuality is not inherent, children are vulnerable and subject to persuasion by immoral and perverse gays.

A medical advisor to the *Focus on the Family* organization writes that paedophilia 'is statistically more closely associated with homosexuality' and that 'the dramatic shift of values that normalizes homosexuality must inevitably come to normalize all forms of sexuality... *paedophilia explicitly included*'.<sup>70</sup> An 'ex-gay' man wrote in 1994:

[Many] homosexual men try to recruit young boys [age 12-17] and often succeed. All pedophile-rights groups in America are made of homosexual men. . .The problem with 'gay rights' is that it makes kids more willing to go along with homosexuality... [because] they are easier for adult predators to seduce.<sup>71</sup>

For the religious right, testimonies such as these also serve as evidence that gay sexual orientation is not inherent since there are ex-gays who are now heterosexual. This reinforces the arguments that homosexuality is an immoral chosen lifestyle.

Jennifer Terry lists several reasons as to why the claim that paedophilia and homosexuality are related became so popular. First, she writes, gays were seen as 'compulsive, obsessive, and uncontrollable in their impulses' and children were easy targets for such people. Additionally, gays were perceived as psycho-sexually immature, which seems to indicate a sexual inclination toward youth. Moreover, in the media 'sexual abuse and murder of children [appeared] in the same stories featuring statistics on arrests of men who committed crimes related to homosexual acts [that] involved consenting adults'.<sup>72</sup> Finally, the politics of the Cold War and fear of conspiracy against America also contributed to 'a picture of the homosexual as a member of a clandestine underworld'.<sup>73</sup> According to anti-gay framing, not only do gays try to have sex with children, but they also try to recruit children to become homosexual. One argument used is that gays attempt to recruit children because that they cannot reproduce.<sup>74</sup>

Such framing involves amplification with respect to both values and beliefs. Frame amplification refers to giving particular priority to a certain value or belief to which the movement adheres. On one hand, portraying homosexuality as a threat to children gives a particular emphasis to the importance of children.<sup>75</sup> Children are essential to any society and

---

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 48.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., at 78.

<sup>70</sup> J. Satinover, n. 51 above, at 62, original emphasis.

<sup>71</sup> Weller in W. Williams and Y. Retter, *Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: a Documentary History*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), at 228.

<sup>72</sup> J. Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), at 322.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., at 323.

<sup>74</sup> See D. Romesburg, 'Straight from their mouths: Anita Bryant and Dr. Laura Schlessinger show that some things never change', *The Advocate*, 15 Aug. 2000.

<sup>75</sup> See Dobson and Bauer in D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 85.

value system, but so are many others, for example, women and the elderly. The anti-gay movement, however, gives particular emphasis to *children* (e.g. *Save our children* campaigns) while, for example, sexual violence against women is not given the same level of importance. As a result, this framing accentuates the belief that homosexuals are a threat to children and their well-being.

The other key belief that the anti-gay movement uses in framing is that AIDS is a 'gay disease'. The movement claimed that AIDS was 'God's punishment against those who led a sinful and promiscuous lifestyle'.<sup>76</sup> AIDS was even first called Gay Related Immune Disorder and was only later renamed as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, some anti-gay activists use AIDS as an excuse for what they call 'scientific research,' the findings of which only reinforce anti-gay propaganda. Among them is Paul Cameron of the *Family Research Institute*. A flyer of that organization called gay sex a 'crime against humanity' and declared that the epidemic of AIDS was due to the 'fact' that gay men went on 'worldwide sex tours' infecting others.<sup>78</sup>

If AIDS is seen as God's punishment, then the argument that homosexuality is sinful and immoral is reinforced. In the early phases of the epidemic, *Christianity Today* asserted that the 'Bible condemns homosexual acts as sin, and the wages of sin is always death.'<sup>79</sup> Some protesters even spoke of the 'moral message' of AIDS.<sup>80</sup> Either people had to do something about immoral gays, or they themselves would suffer the consequences: 'The sins of a few... can cause an epidemic among the masses who become their innocent victims.'<sup>81</sup> This is another example of frame amplification. It gives birth to, and builds on, the belief that AIDS and homosexuality are related and unless something is done to stop gay sex, AIDS remains a threat to the public health of the society. Contrary to these unsupported views, scientific research discovered that homosexuality was not necessarily connected to AIDS and the diseased was 'de-gayed'.<sup>82</sup> As a result, the use of such framing has also declined.

The Religious Right uses other frames to portray homosexuality as a threat to society. In its rhetoric, gays become the *enemy* of society and there is more talk of *battle* against them.<sup>83</sup> In *Shadow in the Land*, William Dennemeyer says:

How are we, as supporters of the Judeo-Christian ethic, supposed to respond to this well-planned and well-financed attack on our civilization? The question faces us wherever we turn, demanding an answer – not in ten years, not in two years, but this year, now! ... We must either defeat militant homosexuality or it will defeat us.<sup>84</sup>

In such framing, the notion of threat is coupled with a sense of urgency. This sort of argument can well fit the frame extension category. When the programmes of a social movement 'appear to have little if any bearing on the life situations and interests of potential

---

<sup>76</sup> J. Terry, n. 72 above, at 385.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.; J. Satinover, n. 51 above, at 16.

<sup>78</sup> In C. Bull and J. Gallagher, n. 36 above, at 26.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in J. Terry, n. 72 above, at 184.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., at 185.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., at 184.

<sup>82</sup> C. Campbell and R. Davidson, 'Gay and Lesbian Issues in the Congressional Arena' in C. Rimmerman, K. Wald and C. Wilcox, n. 1 above, 347-76, at 353.

<sup>83</sup> See D. Herman, n. 15 above, at 55.

<sup>84</sup> Dennemeyer, *ibid.*, at 63.

adherents,' the movement can 'extend the boundaries of its primary framework so as to encompass' such interests and values.<sup>85</sup> If homosexuality is seen and framed as a threat to society at large, the potential adherents are even more in number than when the anti-gay movement targets only Christians by framing homosexuality as immoral and against God's will.

Additionally, while gays and lesbians are seen as fighting for *their own* rights, Religious Right activists appear to be concerned with the well being of society *in general* and the defence of morality and goodness, something that can arguably add to the credibility of the latter. The credibility of the claim-makers can thus add to the degree to which a frame resonates in the broader culture.<sup>86</sup> In other words, people can be more influenced by the anti-gay sentiments than by gay rights arguments because they see anti-gay campaigners as those concerned with the *general* good – while they may view gay rights activists as those caring only about themselves.

Another example of frame extension is the blame directed to gays and lesbians for manmade disasters that occur. 'Since social movements seek to remedy or alter some problematic situation or issue, it follows that directed action is contingent on identification of the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents.'<sup>87</sup> This demonstrates the vulnerability of gays and lesbians as scapegoats and the way in which the anti-gay rights movement portrays them as a threat to society. Not only AIDS, but even the events of 11 September 2001 have been attributed to the practice of homosexuality since they are seen as a punishment from God. On the conservative Christian television programme *The 700 Club*, Jerry Falwell declared that:

The pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU [the American Civil Liberties Union], People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point my finger in their faces and say, 'You helped this happen'.<sup>88</sup>

Again, this perspective disavows alternative evidence which explains these occurrences more reasonably.

## 5. Liberal Christians and Homosexuality

Although fundamentalist Christians have used religion as a frame for their activities against the human rights of the homosexual, that is by no means the predominant or the sole religious stand towards homosexuality. Many churches have changed their policies and have become more inclusive of non-heterosexual members.<sup>89</sup> According to Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, '[a]ll movement appears to be towards greater inclusiveness towards homosexuality and homosexuals. This is reinforced by the more accepting stance of today's

---

<sup>85</sup> D. Snow et al., n. 22 above, at 472.

<sup>86</sup> R. Benford and D. Snow, 'Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment' (2000) 26 *Annual Review of Sociology*, 611-39, at 619.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, at 616.

<sup>88</sup> Falwell in E. Marcus, *Making Gay History: The Half Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights*, (New York : Perennial, 2002), at 450.

<sup>89</sup> For a list of forty four American denominations' position on homosexuality see Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, available at [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_chur2.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur2.htm)

youth. We are unaware of any religious groups becoming less inclusive.<sup>90</sup> In 1969 the United Church of Christ ‘opposed all laws that made private homosexual relations between consenting adults a crime’.<sup>91</sup> Bill Johnson was ‘the first openly gay man to be ordained in a mainline church in 1972 when he received his ordination credentials from the United Church of Christ’.<sup>92</sup> The United Church of Christ even supported families of gays and lesbians, starting from 1983,<sup>93</sup> and gays in the military.<sup>94</sup> ‘The United Church of Christ Board for Homeland Ministries supported equal marriage rights for same-sex gender couples in 1996 and declared in 1997 that fidelity and integrity in marriage were the standards for all people.’<sup>95</sup>

The United Church of Christ is not the only church that welcomes gay and lesbian members. In 1976 the Episcopal Church spoke positively of gays and lesbians, calling them ‘children of God’.<sup>96</sup> It verifies the religious value of tolerance. Although in 1977 the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church stated its opposition to ordination of homosexuals, ‘Episcopal bishops in certain dioceses continued quietly to ordain homosexual people throughout the 1980s.’<sup>97</sup> In 1998, the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops asserted that ‘we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ’ although ‘rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture.’<sup>98</sup> In 2003, Canon Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, was consecrated as Bishop of New Hampshire, thus indicating some progress in the acceptance of homosexuality by religious groups.

Nevertheless, the Presbyterian Church projects a less liberal attitude towards homosexuality. It proclaims on its website that ‘[h]omosexuality is not God’s wish for humanity,’ that gay marriage could not be performed, and that ‘practicing homosexual persons may not be ordained as ministers of the Word and Sacrament.’<sup>99</sup> Despite this statement, however, single homosexuals are not barred from ordination. The General Guide to the Facts about the Presbyterian Church confirms that ‘there is no legal, social, or moral justification for denying homosexual persons access to the basic requirements of human social existence’ and that ‘[p]ersons who manifest homosexual behavior must be treated with the profound respect and pastoral tenderness due all people of God.’<sup>100</sup> These affirmations suggest a relaxing of negative attitudes towards homosexuality on the part of some religious

<sup>90</sup> Statement of the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, available at [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_chur2.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur2.htm), last accessed 7 Feb. 2006.

<sup>91</sup> W. Cadge, ‘Vital Conflicts: the Mainline Denominations Debate Homosexuality’ in R. Wuthnom and J. Evans (eds.) *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 265-86, at 267.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, at 268.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, at 270.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, at 274.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, at 273.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, at 268.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, at 269.

<sup>98</sup> Resolution I.10.c & d, available at <http://www.aco.org/lambeth/1/sect1rpt.html>.

<sup>99</sup> See <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101=homosexual.htm>, last accessed 7 Feb. 2006

<sup>100</sup> General Guide to the Facts about the Presbyterian Church – USA, available at <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-homosexual.htm>.

groups. Additionally, the United Methodist Church states: ‘Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons.’<sup>101</sup> But at the same time, the General Conference in 2004 stated that the ‘practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching’.<sup>102</sup>

Therefore, it becomes apparent that the animosity of Christian fundamentalists towards homosexuality is *not* shared by many other Christian churches and denominations. In the discourse on homosexuals and their human rights, however, the Religious Right seems to have dominated the agenda and liberal churches appear to be in a position of retreat. Although it seems that the attitudes of liberal churches are more positive and inclusive of LGBT populations, their voice is more subdued than the conservative outcries. Robert Wuthnow argues that liberal Christians have let fundamentalists ‘set the agenda’.<sup>103</sup> Wuthnow indicates several reasons to account for the limited proactive response of more liberal religious groups. Fundamentalists claim that they remain faithful to the Christian tradition; they express certainty and simplicity on most issues they deem vital. In fact, the number of their churches and their ensuing power has grown remarkably in recent years. In contrast, Wuthnow describes liberal Christians as *accommodating* toward modernity and change, as a result of which they appear non-traditional. He further suggests that the positions of those Christians require complicated reasoning; and this, in turn, makes it more difficult for them to transmit their principles to their children.<sup>104</sup>

Because their positions are not so easily broadcast to the general public, liberal churches also appear less capable of framing their religious beliefs for the promotion of human rights of the homosexual. The framing of conservative Christians, on the other hand, has had much greater resonance and has hence strengthened their fight against gay rights.

## 6. Effects and Conclusion

Although Christianity *per se* takes an ambiguous stance towards homosexuality and the human rights of the homosexual, fundamentalist Christians have worked vigorously to frame religion in a way that firmly opposes gay rights. Moreover, conservative Christians have argued that gays are immoral, sinful, and constitute a threat to children, health, and society in general. Despite this opposition, while the fundamentalist Christian anti-gay movement has been active for a few decades, the gay rights movement has had some measure of success, which paradoxically fuels the backlash of the anti-gay movement. Gays and lesbians have gained visibility and have secured some anti-discrimination legislation. Some positive steps have occurred on the issues of adoption and gays in the military, which signal progress for the LGBT community. To underscore these advances, in May 2004 gay marriage was legalized in the state of Massachusetts. Thus, a trend can be detected that negative public opinion towards homosexuality is, in part, decreasing.

---

<sup>101</sup> United Methodist Church ‘About our Church’, available at <http://www.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=1753>.

<sup>102</sup> L. Green, ‘Delegates affirm stance against ordaining practicing homosexuals’, available at <http://www.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=17&mid=4558>.

<sup>103</sup> R. Wuthnow, n. 14 above, at 127.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, at 125-35.

In their statistical analysis of the issue of public opinion and gay rights, Clyde Wilcox and Robin Wolpert conclude that 'religion is a very important source of evaluation of gays and lesbians.'<sup>105</sup> Wilcox and Wolpert also assert that '[a]n important part of evaluations lies in a constellation of beliefs that homosexuality is unnatural, that gays and lesbians try to seduce heterosexuals, and that they can change their orientation.'<sup>106</sup> These outcomes shed light on the anti-gay movement's efforts to emphasize precisely such beliefs as a framing strategy. Despite the activities of the conservative Christians in opposition to the gay rights movement, some evidence suggests positive changes in public affirmation that homosexuals as human beings are entitled to enjoy equal rights. Moreover, it has been shown that there is no inherent opposition between religious values and gay rights.

Through framing, the Religious Right portrays religious beliefs and values in a way that *appear* anti-gay. There is no logical reasoning that gays pose a threat to society. There are arguments that the gay rights movement can make in order to relate to religious beliefs for the promotion of gay rights, equality, and tolerance. For example, homosexuality in the animal kingdom could be used as an argument that it *is* a natural inclination (and hence created by God), or one could promote tolerance through references to Jesus' acceptance of those in oppressed groups. By rarely clinging to religious values that affirm equal rights for everyone regardless of sexual orientation, the gay rights movement misses an opportunity to connect to religious populations to convince them their religious beliefs are not necessarily in opposition to gay rights.

---

<sup>105</sup> C. Wilcox and R. Wolpert 'Gay rights in the public sphere: public opinion on gay and lesbian equality' in C. Rimmerman, K. Wald and C. Wilcox, n. 1 above, 409-32, at 417.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, at 419.