

No Human Right to Sodomy:
Christian Conservative Opposition to LGBTQ Human Rights

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From Human Rights to LGBTQ Human Rights

About fifteen years ago, agents and agencies of the US government quietly began engaging in projects meant to serve goals of justice, equity and/or human rights protection for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender women and men, men who have sex with men (MSM), women who have sex with women (WSW), and same-sex loving adults outside the United States.¹ US government officials have: designed programs to advance gender and sexual minority human rights abroad; funded individuals and groups engaged in social, legal, or political advocacy on behalf of LGBT people abroad; worked closely with local and regional activists and groups to provide support and resources to LGBT people; provided resources to protect individuals who are targeted for their minority sexual identity or behavior, or for their minority gender identity or presentation; brokered relationships among human rights actors that include governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith communities and faith-based groups, and corporations; and advocated for LGBT issues in regional, national, and international forums.

In May, 2013, The Economist published an article entitled, “The War on Gays: Strange Bedfellows,” that featured the lede, “American Christian zealots are fighting back against gay rights—abroad.”² Whatever their own orientation toward LGBTQ identities, desire, or behavior, most Americans would not be surprised to learn that the most vehement opposition to the promotion of LGBTQ civil and human rights issues from the conservative right, and especially from the Christian right movement. However, opposition to the US government designing and

executing programmatic and rhetorical interventions that link LGBT rights and human rights comes in two ideological packages in the United States. The first of these is generated from the political right by conservative opponents of US government investments in human rights protections for LGBTQ people and the projection of those protections abroad in US spheres of influence. For social conservatives who oppose characterizing LGBT rights as civil and human rights, the inclusion of LGBT people in categories populated by members of racial, ethnic, religious and other groups of what they regard as genuine victims of oppression is an insult to the dignity of these groups and a cynical redefinition of immorality as abjection. For example, in US domestic politics what civil rights-oriented LGBT activists term “marriage equality,” Christian conservative leaders have called “counterfeit ‘marriage’” to undermine the legitimacy of any civil rights claim. In the international context, US Christian right leaders have been implicated in anti-LGBT funding, lobbying, political activism, and cultural projects around the world.³

By contrast, opposition from a subset of the political left is not motivated by animus toward LGBTQ people and the belief that same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity should be stigmatized and punished. But it is complicated and multi-faceted. Progressive skepticism about—if not outright opposition to—discourse such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2011 equation of gay rights and human rights tends to focus attention at national and transnational levels of analysis. Such opposition employs an explicit critique of the camouflaging of US national and neoliberal business interests as disinterested virtues exercised on behalf of disempowered groups. And it also repudiates, often on cultural grounds, the notion that there can be any universal set of human rights or values that does not reflect a western, universalizing—and therefore culturally imperialistic—ideal.⁴

In this paper, I turn to the political right and examine the opposition to the linkage between LGBT issues and the discourse of human rights. US Christian conservatives have long opposed LGBT legal and political rights and the linkage of LGBT social, legal, and political progress with the rubric of “human rights.” As the Christian right movement has done in domestic anti-LGBT politics, in its international politics and coalition-building, the movement has continued to innovate to serve its commitments and interests. Like so many other labels, concepts, and categories of political life, “human rights” is a contested idea. Often identified with the political left in the global north, it is also accurate to say that human rights has skeptics on the left and proponents on the right. In recent years, the Christian right has turned more attention and resources not only to resisting LGBT rights outside the US, but also identifying and opposing any actions and rhetoric that indicate the US government is positively disposed to the human rights and wellbeing of LGBT people.

The “External” Critique of LGBTQ Human Rights

The conservative critique of LGBTQ human rights, and of the US government as a champion of those rights, is “external” to the LGBTQ movement in the sense that it does not originate in a concern for the wellbeing of those who engage in same-sex sexual relations and/or exhibit a non-normative gender identity. The American Christian conservative movement is the most consistent and persistent opponent of LGBTQ civil rights in the US. Hence, I begin with the Christian right’s struggle against LGBT civil rights and social recognition in the US. In addition to resisting the normalization of same-sex relations and the erosion of stigma against same-sex sexuality and non-normative gender identities, the Christian right opposes policies and social practices that incorporate LGBT people into institutions, organizations, and professions

from which they previously have been excluded, including: teaching, marriage, the military, the Boy Scouts, parenthood, and the clergy.

In recent years, the Christian right has encountered what appears to be an intractable problem with its anti-LGBT politics in the US: a gradual, though unmistakable, rise in support for inclusion and equal treatment for LGBTQ people. The various groups and leaders of the Christian right have responded to changes in attitudes to same-sex sexuality in ways that range from resignation to resoluteness in the face of incremental defeats. Since the 1990s, Christian right leaders have engaged in a bifurcated discourse about same-sex sexuality, directing rhetoric that condemned LGBTQ people to believers and more “democratic” rhetoric—calling, for example, for majoritarianism on same-sex marriage and rights protections for those who oppose same-sex sexuality—toward believers who will deploy those arguments in public debates.⁵ However, as attitudes toward same-sex sexuality and LGB people have begun to shift, “democratic” rhetoric that relies on public opinion has become more rare, and Christian conservative elites have expressed more anxiety that the US has reached a tipping point of tolerance of immorality. As social and legal circumstances have changed, the Christian right has gradually reoriented itself from a movement concerned with rolling back rights and restoring stigma associated with non-normative sexuality and gender identity, to a movement that seeks to hold the line against additional LGBTQ legal and social gains in the US and engage in international anti-LGBTQ advocacy.

As anti-LGBTQ attitudes have declined in the US, many organizations, leaders, and activists have moved some of their attention and operations to issues and arenas of contest outside the US that hold more promise for implacable antagonism to LGBTQ rights and recognition. In some parts of the world, these US-based anti-LGBTQ actors have become

recognized as “experts” on the problem of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and the dire consequences their existence poses for the communities and nations in which they live.

Addressing anti-LGBT Christian conservative influence in Uganda on a segment of his HBO program, “Last Week Tonight,” John Oliver put it this way: “Africa isn’t just where we send our losing team’s Super Bowl shirts; it’s where we now send our losing political philosophies.”⁶

The title of this paper, “no human right to sodomy,” is a phrase taken from a 2014 essay by anti-LGBT pastor and attorney Scott Lively, who has played a prominent role in inciting bias and hostility to LGBT people in many parts of the world but especially is known for his work encouraging the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda.⁷ LGBTQ Americans who were adults in the 1980s may also hear echoes of a similar phrase from the majority opinion in the 1986 Supreme Court case of Bowers v. Hardwick. Writing for the majority, Justice Byron White stated that the US Constitution does not confer “a fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy.”⁸ Indeed, the phrase, or one like it, can be found in many contexts of conservative opinion.

In order to understand the nature of the Christian right’s opposition to US government engagement in programs and policies to defend the human rights of LGBTQ people abroad, it is necessary to address the movement’s orientation toward LGBTQ rights as well as its simultaneous repudiation and embrace of human rights under certain conditions. International Christian conservative activism against LGBT people, same-sex sexuality, and non-normative gender identity has required the formation of alliances and the constant development of new rhetorics and practices. When it comes to Christian conservative rhetoric and activism against both LGBTQ human rights and the US government’s affirmation of those rights, the Christian right movement relies on ministers and churches, political information networks, legal advocacy,

domestic and international coalitions, missionary activism, and global-institutional advocacy. Anti-LGBTQ human rights advocacy also relies on multiple forms of domestic anti-LGBTQ rhetoric that informs and primes domestic Christian conservative constituencies to embrace particular attitudes toward human rights and LGBTQ human rights. Human rights often have been understood by their proponents to originate in our shared status as human beings. Theorists have developed overlapping conceptualizations of human rights that apply to all human beings under a variety of rubrics, and I return to this question of universalism briefly in the conclusion.

The Christian Right's Human Rights

To understand the Christian right movement's orientation toward the idea of LGBTQ human rights we must investigate the movement's orientation toward the idea, as well as the application, of human rights simpliciter. Judging from the discourse produced by the Christian conservative movement, Christian conservatism is of two minds about human rights—what they are as well as how Christian conservatives should think about them. One perspective is that human rights are specious, a deplorable fiction, and a “human construct” like such popular ideas as the separation of church and state. The second perspective—partially subscribing to human rights doctrine—is more complex than simple rejection as well as more likely to be deployed in circumstances in which a pragmatic appeal to human rights may pay off in grassroots enthusiasm and mobilization, successful litigation, and/or support from elected officials. Rather than being mutually exclusive perspectives with their own constituencies, however, these two views of human rights are flexible enough that Christian conservatives can easily subscribe to whichever view is most consistent with the context at hand.

Contributing to this flexibility are key similarities between the two perspectives. First, the Christian right rejects interpretations of “human rights” that incorporate “second generation” social and economic rights because such rights are inconsistent with the economic beliefs of Christian conservatives—especially of Christian conservative elites and opinion leaders. Although US Christian conservatives have not always been economically laissez-faire conservatives, a strong current of prosperity-gospel market fundamentalism runs through American history, from “acres of diamonds” to the contemporary conviction that the Bible teaches the superiority of free-market capitalism and the moral wickedness of the welfare state.⁹ And second, the movement also repudiates applications of human rights doctrine to many particular categories of identity including, but not limited to, non-heterosexual sexual identities, and variations of sexual behavior and gender identity that are inconsistent with the movement’s ideal of the “natural family.”

The first Christian right perspective on human rights is that they are a modern construct that undermines God-given natural rights. An example can be found in the Heritage Foundation’s “Understanding America” series of booklets that aim to educate readers about “how the United States’ commitment to the universal truths of human equality and the right to self-government—as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—requires a vigilant defense of the cause of liberty, both at home and abroad.”¹⁰ One booklet in the series is “How Should Americans Think About Human Rights?,” written by Kim R. Holmes, a Heritage distinguished fellow and an assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs under the Bush administration from 2001 to 2005. As the title suggests, the booklet is dedicated to the pedagogical purpose of explaining the proper perspective on human rights, in this case distinguishing natural rights

embraced by the American founders from human rights “manufactured” by more modern social engineers.

“How Should Americans Think About Human Rights?” begins with an account of categories of rights that sharply contrasts natural rights with “the thoroughly modern idea of ‘human rights.’” While natural rights are “endowed by God” and “do not change over time,” human rights “constantly change” and give rise to, for example, a “cottage industry” of “new ‘economic and social rights’” formulated and defended by “international bureaucrats.” While the natural rights of individuals can be satisfied without “infringing on someone else’s rights,” human rights require government so powerful as to “crush the natural rights and liberty of individuals.” While natural rights respect individuality, human rights that recognize the risks of harm associated with categories of identity such as sex or gender identity inevitably undermine the humanity of those they aspire to protect: “if your social value is defined by your sex, class, or race, then your intrinsic value as a person is lost.” It is not difficult to understand from these contrasts that for US Christian conservatives, “human rights” is not a benign idea. Rather, a shared international regime of human rights threatens both individual human beings and—to the extent it espouses and abides by such a regime—the sovereignty and Christian character of America.

The second Christian right perspective on human rights doctrine rests on a more selective affirmation of human rights than prevails among secular human rights organizations and proponents. Examples of this selective affirmation of human rights demonstrate that the Christian right doesn’t just reject the concept and application of human rights. What is more surprising, however, even for those who are familiar with American Christian conservative movement politics, is that the Christian right occasionally is willing to invoke and employ norms

of international human rights, including international human rights treaties that are generally anathema to conservative elites and activists. Where Christian conservatives differ from other adherents to an international regime of human rights is in their consistent opposition to defining social and economic rights as human rights and in their interpretation of what kinds of identities and forms of harm provoke human rights protection. For the Christian right, freedom of religious belief and practice and protection for people who are menaced on account of their faith justify recourse to human rights.

There are many examples of the American Christian right's activism on behalf of a natural and human right to religious freedom in the international arena, but consider one example that has received relatively little attention outside the movement: the freedom to homeschool children. A case of the right to homeschool that has become a cause célèbre among Christian conservatives is that of the Romeike family of Bissengen, Germany. In 2006, evangelical Christians Uwe and Hannelore Romeike, residents of the German state of Baden-Württemberg, began to homeschool their children in defiance of a German law that requires children to attend either public or private school. Confronted with fines and the threat of prosecution, in 2008 the Romeikes brought their children to the US and settled in Tennessee after an immigration judge granted their request for asylum on the basis of religious persecution. However, the family was not yet home free. After the Board of Immigration Appeals overturned the initial ruling and the Supreme Court refused to hear their case, Christian conservatives petitioned the White House to permit the family to remain in the US, and the Romeikes were granted permanent legal status to live in the US.

In the US, the Romeikes were championed by the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), which raised funds for and provided their legal defense, and coordinated

the messaging strategy for them and other homeschooling families. Michael Farris, founder and chairman of HSLDA, and Michael Donnelly, director for international affairs of the HSLDA, explicitly linked the Romeike family's plight with human rights doctrine in a way they understood as vindicating their—and the family's—interests. In a 2013 press release that accompanied the filing of a petition to the Supreme Court, Farris said of the case that “parents, not the government, decide first how children are educated. Germany's notorious persecution of families who homeschool violates their own obligations to uphold human rights standards and must end.”¹¹ Donnelly defended the Romeikes' claims, in writing and in court, alluded not to natural law but to the incorporation of principles of human rights in international legal instruments:

As Americans, we enjoy great freedoms guaranteed by our constitutions and laws. Among these freedoms is the right to direct the education and upbringing of our children—a fundamental right recognized by the United States Supreme Court in the landmark case Pierce v. Society of Sisters and its progeny. This right has not only been recognized by the Supreme Court, but has also been noted in the constitutions of other countries and in international treaties and declarations.¹²

The appeal to “the constitutions of other countries” and “international treaties and declarations” in the case of the Romeike family is nothing short of remarkable.

Christian conservatives typically eschew citations to foreign or international norms, laws, treaties, and institutions on behalf of human rights claims as violations of US sovereignty and God-ordained American exceptionalism. However, that's when appeals are being made to more liberal policies or practices. So, for example, Michael Farris and the HSLDA have been pivotal in defeating Senate ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities, which the UN General Assembly adopted in 2006 Obama signed in 2009. In 2012 and 2014, Christian conservatives mobilized and lobbied against the treaty, arguing that it was likely to “infringe on the rights of parents . . . threaten states’ rights and become a legal tool for pro-choice advocates.”¹³ In the Romeike’s case, by contrast, Christian conservative home-schooling proponents made pragmatic appeals to human rights they believe both reflect God-given liberty and restate natural rights that precede the establishment of government.¹⁴

However Christian right organizations and advocates interpret and either deploy or reject human rights, they repudiate discourse that explicitly identifies LGBTQ people as victims of human rights violations or that specifically advocates for their inclusion in human rights protections. To do otherwise would constitute a kind of concession to identities and practices that Christian conservatives abhor. A similar tactic of rejecting explicit references to LGBT people, identity, or behavior emerges with reference to school bullying in the US. As the phenomenon of bullying began to receive wide public attention in recent years, Christian conservatives acknowledged bullying as a problem but opposed efforts both to highlight anti-LGBT bullying and incorporate education about LGBT issues and toleration into school programs. For Christian conservatives, these measures accorded unacceptable legitimacy to LGBT identity as the price of confronting the harm done by bullying. As D.Ø. Endsjø points out, LGBT people can be considered already included in human rights principles such as equality before the law or prohibitions against discrimination without being named specifically as beneficiaries of these protections. However, the prevalence of religious objections to LGBT human rights and religious justifications for discrimination make it necessary or LGBTQ advocates to include sexuality and gender identity explicitly in their articulation of human rights.¹⁵

Christian right rhetoric about LGBTQ issues and people takes many forms. With regard to LGBTQ human rights, some rhetoric is explicit, commending nations and leaders that repudiate LGBTQ people, behavior, relationships, and advocacy. Some is more circuitous, commending anti-LGBTQ beliefs and practices of peoples and nations and/or positively contrasting these nations with the amoral US and/or Europe. A third form of rhetoric works through juxtaposition. This rhetoric features separate but, in many cases, simultaneous denunciations of LGBTQ rights (including the Obama administration's support for LGBTQ rights) and the precarious position of religious believers in the US and abroad. The claim that the Obama administration refuses to intercede on behalf of threatened religious minorities or individual Christian believers is common. The message these juxtapositions convey is: liberals/unbelievers/Democrats/the Obama administration caters to LGBTQ people/gays/homosexuals but does nothing to protect embattled Christians to whom human rights commitments properly belong.

LGBTQ vs. Religion in Human Rights

The most direct and explicit way that US Christian conservatives denigrate LGBTQ human rights is to publicize the anti-LGBTQ beliefs, commitments, and public policies of nations and leaders who represent a biblical position on sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, Christian conservative leaders, activists, and advocacy organizations have showered Russian President Vladimir Putin and his government with encomia for its anti-LGBTQ laws and social practices. Scott Lively is a co-author (with Kevin Abrams) of The Pink Swastika: Homosexuality in the Nazi Party and president of the antigay nonprofit organization, Abiding Truth Ministries. Lively bills himself as “one of the most knowledgeable and articulate

opponents of the homosexual agenda in America.” and he brought his expertise on the gay agenda to a conference in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, just before the Anti-Homosexual Bill was introduced. Lively boasts about that conference in his online “Report from Uganda,” noting with pride the eminence of his audience, which included lawyers, teachers, ministers, and members of the Ugandan Parliament. Lively was backed up by two other American experts on the “gay agenda”: ex-gay Caleb Lee Brundidge and Don Schmierer. All three have disclaimed responsibility for the bill that quickly followed, though Lively currently has been sued by a Ugandan gay rights group for “inciting the persecution of gay men and lesbians” in that country.

In his WorldNetDaily essay, “Russia Set to Supplant U.S. as Human-Rights Leader,” Scott Lively positively assesses official Russian policies against same-sex sexuality and LGBTQ people and asserts that Russia will soon emerge as “the greatest defender of true human rights among nations.” Anti-abortion activist Randall Terry notes that “The Russians have it right; we don’t evangelize our children into the homosexual lifestyle.” The American Family Association offers the rhetorical question: “Which president is the lion of Christianity, the defender of Christian values, the president that’s calling his nation back to embracing its identity as a nation founded on Christian values?, answering: “Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia.” And Franklin Graham, his father Billy’s heir and president and CEO of two Christian conservative organizations, has this to say on the Russian President’s anti-LGBTQ statements and policies:

In my opinion, Putin is right on these issues. Obviously, he may be wrong about many things, but he has taken a stand to protect his nation’s children from the damaging effects of any gay and lesbian agenda. Our president and his attorney general have turned their backs on God and His standards, and many in the Congress are following the

administration's lead. This is shameful. The world used to look to America for moral leadership. But those days are long gone.¹⁶

Another example of a nation singled out by Christian conservatives for engaging in anti-LGBTQ policies and rhetoric is Uganda, designated along with Rwanda by Saddleback Church's Pastor Rick Warren as a "purpose-driven" nation. Warren's designation lays a foundation for a continent-wide All African Purpose Driven Church Conference slated to be held in Rwanda in 2015. Paul Cameron's Family Research Institute, no longer a major player in anti-LGBTQ human rights, explicitly supported Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill, noting that "depending on the severity of the homosexual offense, a fine, prison or even capital punishment is warranted. The most important thing is to make it illegal Indeed, if Uganda is to learn anything from us, it is to be harsh with those who choose to act on homosexual desires." And Donald Wildmon's American Family Association takes the position that "Uganda stands with Phil [Robertson of Duck Dynasty]. Make homosexuality contrary to public policy. It can be done."

However, not all Christian conservative reporting and pedagogy on the conflict between LGBTQ human rights and religion is so explicit. Much of it relies on comprehensive ingroup pedagogy to signal affirmation of, and affinity with, anti-LGBTQ regimes and opprobrium to (more) pro-LGBTQ regimes and public attitudes to Christian conservative believers. The Family Research Council, the preeminent US Christian conservative research, lobbying, and education organization, has produced this kind of rhetoric which, because it doesn't mention LGBTQ rights or issues directly, might not be recognized as commentary on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In October, 2012, Uganda's pious President Museveni delivered a speech in which he publicly repented of his and his nation's sins, dedicated his country to God, and renounced "the

Satanic influence” of “the last 50 years of [Uganda’s] history.” Museveni did not mention homosexuality or the Anti-Homosexuality Bill specifically in the long list of national sins for which he called upon God to forgive Uganda, but he did name “sexual immorality,” and political observers connected the proposed legislation to the subtext of the speech.

The Family Research Council responded to Museveni’s repentance speech from a variety of social media platforms, including twitter. On November 26, 2013, FRC dispatched an email alert—daily alerts are captioned, “Tony Perkins’ Washington Update”—to subscribers entitled, “During Revival, Media Still Atone Deaf.” FRC’s communiques on Museveni and the repentance agenda quoted liberally from Museveni’s speech and had two prongs: the first was commending Museveni as a Christian national leader. The second prong was undermining criticisms of Uganda’s threats to further criminalize same-sex sexuality, LGBT rights advocacy, and even knowledge of the commission of same-sex acts. With regard to commendation for Museveni, in the November 6 alert, FRC announces an “inspirational moment for the [Ugandan] nation” and lavishes praise on Museveni and his government for proclaiming the kind of “faithfulness” “that will raise Uganda’s status as a new power in Africa.”

With regard to addressing criticisms of Uganda and Museveni on LGBTQ human rights, FRC notes that Uganda “has stood — often alone — for traditional values, abstinence, and families despite tremendous pressure from the West.” A target of the longer commendation of Museveni is the mainstream media in the US which, having drawn attention to violations of LGBT peoples’ human rights in Uganda, is accused of being “so threatened by religion that it refuses to leave another country alone to pursue its own views on sexuality and faith.”

What is striking about the construction of the FRC email alert is not only the enthusiastic affirmation of President Museveni’s insistence on “faithfulness” on matters of “sexuality and

faith.” It is also that, significantly, the only person quoted besides Museveni is Scott Lively, the anti-LGBTQ activist who is widely known for his prominent role in instructing and lobbying Ugandan elites on the threat posed by LGBTQ people. Lively testifies to the superiority of Museveni’s Christian leadership and of his goal of governing Uganda according to biblical law. The conclusion readers familiar with Christian conservative discourse on sexual orientation and gender identity would draw from these elements is that FRC is confirming its support for the highly-publicized Anti-Homosexuality Bill and, by extension, for other anti-LGBTQ attitudes and public policies.

However, the FRC obviously is concerned about having its mainstream reputation linked to reprehensible anti-LGBTQ policies and penalties. Days after “During Revival, Media Still Atone Deaf,” FRC released a follow-up email alert, “Lysin’ Taming over Africa.” Referencing its earlier encomium to Museveni, “Lysin’ Taming” denied that FRC approved of the death penalty for same-sex sexuality or, as FRC President Tony Perkins asserted in 2010, any “penalty which would have the effect of inhibiting compassionate pastoral, psychological, and medical care and treatment for those who experience same-sex attractions or who engage in homosexual conduct.”¹⁷ At least as interesting as FRC’s various statements distancing the organization from Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Bill are its consistent positions opposing “the suggestion that gay and lesbian acts are universal human rights” (“Lysin’ Taming”) and “sweeping and inaccurate assertions that homosexual conduct is internationally recognized as a fundamental human right” (“FRC Statement on H. Res. 1064”)¹⁸

Finally, anti-LGBTQ human rights rhetoric that relies on juxtaposition for its effectiveness requires its audience to make the associations they have been tutored to make by the theo-political discourses that circulate in the Christian right movement. I have collected many

examples of such juxtapositions, and here I offer one from the Family Research Council’s email alerts delivered to FRC members and contacts who participate in Christian conservative activism. On Monday, February 16, 2015, I received an FRC email alert that contained three separate sub-headings. The first, “Libs Come Back for Moore,” reported on Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore—infamous for a controversy over a Ten Commandments monument in the state Judicial Building—instructing probate judges throughout Alabama to defy a federal court order to conduct same-sex marriages. In “Libs,” the issue of same-sex marriage is framed in terms of states’ rights and constitutional authority, but the underlying issue is same-sex marriage. The second report, entitled, “Balk Like an Egyptian,” assails Obama for failing publicly to denounce the Islamic State as a Muslim group targeting Christians for their faith after the murders of twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians. The Obama administration did denounce the “cowardly murders,” but it didn’t do so in terms that satisfied FRC. This is only one example of criticism of the administration for failing or refusing both to adequately support people subjected to (Christian) religious persecution abroad and to sound the tocsin about the reality of “Christian genocide in the Middle East.”

Finally, in the same alert, there is “Ark. de Triumph! Leaders Fight SOGI Wave.” This report focuses on support in the Arkansas legislature for a law (the Conscience Protection Act, not yet signed into law) that would protect business owners from incurring penalties for refusing to serve LGBTQ customers in accordance with their religious faith. It is interesting to note that nowhere in “Ark. de Triumph!” is the abbreviation SOGI explained or the phrase “sexual orientation and gender identity” used. The assumption on the part of Perkins and his staff at the Family Research Council seems to be that readers of these reports will be familiar with the term from other encounters with anti-LGBTQ pedagogy by way of the Christian right.

Over time, the common forms of rhetoric to which believers are constantly exposed across the Christian conservative movement instruct and prime them to understand human rights, religious persecution, LGBTQ/SOGI civil and human rights, anti-LGBTQ/SOGI national leaders, and Obama administration domestic and foreign policy in ways that shape attitudes and mobilize believers. The finer points of Obama administration support for LGBTQ human rights abroad are usually absent from the domestic US rhetoric generated by the Christian right for US audiences. However, right-wing news organizations collect and report instances of this support in ways that inform and bolster Christian conservative rhetoric and activism on the pro-LGBTQ and anti-Christian priorities of the administration, the Democratic Party and liberals in the US.

Monitoring US Support for LGBT Human Rights

Christian right and other organizations that engage in mobilization and activism on the basis of opposition to LGBT civil and human rights tend to focus their political rhetoric on domestic US issues and threats to religious freedoms and Christian believers abroad for their audience of American activists. However, many of the same groups that engage in US-based anti-LGBTQ advocacy—and some different ones—also closely monitor signs of pro-LGBTQ US government interventions in US spheres of influence.

One example of this attentiveness to US government actions on behalf of sexual and gender minorities are the responses from the political right to Barack Obama's December 6, 2011 directive, "International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons." In its reporting, the Christian Post described the directive as "a memorandum to world nations controversially claiming that the fight for LGBT rights was part of the United States' commitment to international human rights" and noted that "the clear

objective of using taxpayer funds to support LGBT communities abroad is sure to anger conservatives at home, as well as conservative governments abroad; Obama is already facing criticism for the announcement of the initiative.”¹⁹

Calling the statement a “full court press against traditional values worldwide,” the anti-LGBT Massachusetts group MassResistance linked readers to the White House website for the full text of the directive. Accompanying text connected the administration’s support for LGBT human rights abroad with a pro-LGBT rights agenda in the United States:

US State Dept to force gay agenda on foreign nations!

1. Obama directs State Department and US agencies to force foreign countries to support international homosexual agenda!
2. On same day: Hillary Clinton pledges \$3 million to international homosexual groups pressuring & subverting foreign governments.
3. Gov't sanctioned website for homosexual activists in US State Dept. and foreign service.
4. US Dept. of Health and Human Services holds “Conference on LGBT Health.”
5. Will Republicans stop this madness if Obama is defeated in 2012?²⁰

Clearly, Republicans were not able to stop the madness after the presidential election of 2012.

In contrast to Fox News, National Review, and The Washington Times, Cybercast News Service News (CNSNews.com) is a relatively obscure source for conservative news and commentary. CNSNews—whose motto is “The Right News. Right Now”—was founded in 1998 as the Conservative News Service by conservative activist L. Brent Bozell III. A division of the Media Research Center and a non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization, CNSNews.com was set up as

an alternative news source that would cover stories that are subject to the bias of omission and report on other news subject to bias by commission. CNSNews.com endeavors to fairly present all legitimate sides of a story and debunk popular, albeit incorrect, myths about cultural and policy issues.²¹

However, even if CNSNews isn't a household name in conservative news, it is one of many outlets and venues through which right-wing news content and perspectives are produced and delivered to U.S. citizens, including the fiscally and socially conservative activists and supporters of the Christian right.

On June 14, 2013, in an article entitled "State Department to Spend \$450,000 Protecting Transgenders Overseas," CNSNews reported that the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor had earmarked "\$450,000 in taxpayer dollars" for a grant dedicated to "protecting transgender persons from violence and combating impunity." Author and CNSNews senior editor Melanie Hunter based her reporting on the announcement of the grant on the website Grants.gov. The announcement sought proposals from "U.S. non-profit organization[s] meeting the provisions described in Internal Revenue Code section 26 USC 501(c) (3)," comparable organization[s] headquartered internationally," or "international organization[s]."²²

CNSNews has also reported on recent State Department changes in policies regarding transgender Americans and passports. And it has generated LGBTQ-related news reports that have been picked up by Tea Party movement organs and, thus, disseminated throughout the overlapping political movements with which the Tea Party shares members.²³ The importance of media organizations, news aggregators, blogs, and other platforms for the Christian right movement can be observed in the work of high-profile as well as less-well known groups that constitute the Christian right. Even small groups and projects that are relatively unknown outside

the Christian conservative movement rely on a variety of conservative media and sources for the raw material of the rhetoric that primes movement activists and believers on the important issues of the day.²⁴

The Beginning of a Conclusion

Even though it might strike many observers as a recondite concern, there is much at stake when the Christian right movement refuses to recognize harms based on non-normative sexuality and gender identity as violations of human rights. In this respect, the Christian right's orientation toward human rights is much like the movement's orientation toward compassion for people who exhibit a same-sex sexual orientation or who engage in same-sex relations: at different times and in different contexts, the movement may either repudiate both compassion and human rights entirely or carefully circumscribe the contexts and conditions under which either should be invoked. In key respects the processes by which the boundary between proper objects of human rights principles and protections is created and maintained are similar to the processes by which proper objects of compassion are marked. Hence, the Christian Right doesn't always reject the concept and commitments associated with human rights, the movement's leaders and organizations rhetorically and politically circumscribe the appropriate boundaries of human rights and the forms of identity to which human rights principles and commitments will apply.²⁵

Christian conservative elites use a variety of media and rhetorical forms to engage in political pedagogy with conservative believers directly on issues of (religious and SOGI) human rights as well as indirectly on a variety of issues that bear on human rights and help to construct a Christian conservative consensus on these issues. There are no doubt a variety of ways to conceptualize how Christian conservatives both embrace and simultaneously selectively deny

human rights doctrine, but here is a starting point for one path to a theoretical account of Christian right human rights. In “The Relative Universality of Human Rights,” Jack Donnelly presents a number of problematic accounts of human rights as well as a conception that Donnelly puts forward as politically and intellectually defensible. I will just suggest in this paper that, as a movement, the Christian right deploys a kind of cultural relativism to undermine and repudiate LGBTQ human rights.

However, the form of the cultural relativism the movement endorses matters. Donnelly is useful here because he distinguishes “methodological cultural relativism”—which he characterizes as a “radically non-judgmental analysis of cultures”—from a kind of “substantive cultural relativism”—a “normative doctrine that demands respect for cultural differences.”²⁶ Ironically, both forms of cultural relativism are more often identified with the political left, against whom the criticism of “moral relativism” is commonly leveled. However, LGBTQ human rights is an occasion for the Christian right to embrace a concern with cultural difference, at least to the extent that it enables the movement to designate as virtuous and authentic those societies and cultures that deny human rights protections to LGBTQ people, encourage social disapprobation against them, and use the levers of public policy to prosecute them.

This is not to say that US Christian conservatives are “hard” or consistent cultural relativists. Given their commitment to a natural (human) right to religious faith and practice—especially, sometimes exclusively, for Christians—they cannot commit to the principle of substantive cultural relativism. But recognizing the Christian right’s pragmatic application of cultural relativism on LGBTQ human rights can help to advance our understanding of how the movement projects “America’s culture wars” around the world and justifies that projection here at home.²⁷

Notes

¹ Mark Blasius draws upon the concept of “same-sex loving” used by some African scholars and activists to reflect ambivalence about conceptualizations of sexuality and homosexuality. See Blasius, “Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)Sexualities across Cultures,” in Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia, eds., Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 221.

² The Economist, “The War on Gays: Strange Bedfellows” (The Economist, May 4, 2013) <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21577043-american-christian-zealots-are-fighting-back-against-gay-rights-abroad-strange-bedfellows> (accessed May 7, 2013).

³ Doris Buss and Didi Herman, Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

⁴ For the opposition of anthropologists to “the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole,” see Ann-Belinda S. Preis, “Human Rights as Cultural Practice: An Anthropological Critique,” Human Rights Quarterly 18 (1996): 286.

⁵ Cynthia Burack, Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2008), pp. 27-30.

⁶ John Oliver, “PRA Discusses American Culture Warriors in Africa on Last Week Tonight with John Oliver,” (Political Research Associates, June 30, 2014)

<http://www.politicalresearch.org/2014/06/30/pr-discusses-american-culture-warriors-in-africa-on-last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver/#> (accessed August 11, 2014).

⁷ Scott Lively, “Russia Set to Supplant U.S. as Human-Rights Leader,” (WorldNetDaily, March 10, 2014) <http://www.wnd.com/2014/03/russia-set-to-supplant-u-s-as-human-rights-leader/> (accessed April 6, 2014).

⁸ Bowers v. Hardwick

⁹ See, respectively, Sarah Posner, God’s Profits: Faith, Fraud, and the Republican Crusade for Values Voters (PoliPoint Press, 2008); Russell H. Conwell, “Acres of Diamonds”; William E. Connolly, Christianity and Capitalism: American Style (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Julie J. Ingersoll, Building God’s Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁰ The Heritage Foundation, “Understanding America,” (Heritage Foundation, 2012) <http://site.heritage.org/understandingamerica/> (accessed August 25, 2013). I obtained a free copy of the booklet during the 2013 Values Voter Summit, held October 10-12 in Washington, DC. The Summit, an annual event since 2006, trains and mobilizes US Christian conservatives and serves as a venue for presentations by Christian conservative elites in government, media, entertainment, and political organizations.

¹¹ Emphasis added.

¹² Michael P. Donnelly, “Seeking Refuge in the Land of Liberty: The Romeike’s Journey,” (Home School Legal Defense Association,

<http://www.hsllda.org/courtreport/V26N2/V26N201.asp> (accessed June 19, 2013). Emphasis added.

¹³ Maggie Severns, “Dole Battles Home-Schoolers Over Disabilities Treaty (July 23, 2014) <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/07/bob-dole-home-school-legal-defense-109201.html?hp=12> (July 23, 2014).

¹⁴ “Romeike Family Can Stay in U.S.”

¹⁵ D.Ø. Endsjø, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights and the Religious Relativism of Human Rights, Human Rights Review Jan-March 2005: 102-110.

¹⁶ Miranda Blue, “Globalizing Homophobia: Parts 1-4” (People For the American Way, October 4, 2013) <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/category/topics/globalizing-homophobia> (accessed March 9, 2015).

¹⁷ J. P. Duffy, “FRC Statement on H. Res. 1064,” (Family Research Council, June 4, 2010) <http://www.frcblog.com/2010/06/frc-statement-on-h-res-1064/> (accessed September 5, 2010).

¹⁸ Much of this analysis is found in Cynthia Burack, “Christian Right Leader Lauds Uganda Dictator as ‘Kill the Gays’ Bill is Revived: Tony Perkins Goes Out of His Way to Ensure that the Family Research Council Deserves its Hate-Group Designation,” (Salon, December 7, 2012) http://www.salon.com/2012/12/07/christian_right_leader_lauds_homophobic_ugandan_dictator/ (accessed December 7, 2012).

¹⁹ Ray Downs, “Obama and Clinton Propose Using Taxpayer Funds to Promote Gay Rights Abroad,” (The Christian Post World, December 6, 2011) <http://www.christianpost.com/news/obama-and-clinton-propose-using-taxpayer-funds-to-promote-gay-rights-abroad-64208/> (accessed June 22, 2013).

²⁰ MassResistance, “US State Dept to force gay agenda on foreign nations!,” (MassResistance, March 30, 2012) http://massresistance.org/docs/gen2/12a/obama_memo_120611/ (accessed June 22, 2013).

²¹ CNSNews.com, “About Us,” (CNSNews.com, 2013) <http://www.cnsnews.com/about-us> (accessed June 17, 2013).

²² Grants.gov, “Protecting Transgender Persons from Violence and Combatting Impunity,” (Grants.gov, March 28, 2013) <http://www.grants.gov/search/search.do;jsessionid=w2T8R4TL6qHZppLQfNCHXB28Jy2KJ7ZyyTr8hJLDD4QTpndpQF12!641006765?oppId=228453&mode=VIEW> (accessed June 20, 2013).

²³ For a set of analyses of right-wing populism and media platforms, see Claire Snyder-Hall and Cynthia Burack, Right-Wing Populism and the Media (Routledge, 2014).

²⁴ Cynthia Burack, “The Politics of a Praying Nation: The Presidential Prayer Team and Christian Right Sexual Morality,” Religion and Popular Culture 26, 2 (2014): 215-229.

²⁵ For an analysis of the Christian right’s internal processes on compassion for same-sex attracted and post-abortive women, see Cynthia Burack, Tough Love: Sexuality, Compassion, and the Christian Right (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2014).

²⁶ Jack Donnelly, “The Relative Universality of Human Rights,” Human Rights Quarterly 29 (2007): 294-95.

²⁷ Kapya Kaoma, “Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches, and Homophobia,” (Political Research Associates, 2009).