
“The Natural Order of Creation”: Naturalizing Discourses in the Christian Same-Sex Marriage Debate

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Abstract: Same-sex marriage is the centre of a vitriolic debate in mainline Christian denominations in the United States. Both those who advocate for same-sex marriage and those who repudiate it employ naturalizing discourses to legitimate their claims. Feminists argue that naturalizing discourses are used to authorize social power. Liberals and evangelicals vie for the power to frame the debate over same-sex marriage. LGBT Christians, on the other hand, both contribute to and resist these discourses; most claim that their sexual orientation is beyond their control, while others evoke a sense of personal agency thereby rejecting the premise of the entire debate.

Keywords: same-sex marriage, Christianity, naturalizing discourses, homosexuality

Résumé : Le mariage entre personnes de même sexe est au centre d'un débat au vitriol au sein des grandes confessions chrétiennes aux États-Unis. Qu'ils soient en faveur du mariage gai ou qu'ils s'y opposent, les participants au débat font usage d'un discours de naturalisation pour légitimer leurs propos. Pour les féministes, les discours de naturalisation servent à autoriser le pouvoir social. Si les mouvements libéraux et évangélistes se disputent le pouvoir de formuler la question sur le mariage gai, les Chrétiens LGBT, pour leur part, contribuent à renforcer ces discours tout en leur opposant une résistance. Ils affirment d'une part que leurs orientations sexuelles sont indépendantes de leur volonté ; de l'autre, ils évoquent leur capacité individuelle d'action, rejetant par le fait même les prémisses qui sous-tendent le débat.

Mots-Clés : mariage entre personnes de même sexe, christianisme, discours de naturalisation, homosexualité.

Same-sex marriage is at the vortex of a vitriolic debate in mainline¹ Christian denominations in the United States. Both those who advocate for same-sex marriage and those who repudiate it employ naturalizing discourses to legitimate their claims. Mainline Christian denominations bring together liberal, evangelical and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT)² Christians who employ disparate rhetorics that are usually examined in isolation. This diversity makes mainline denominations unique sites in which to explore the naturalizing discourses employed in the same-sex marriage debate. Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) argue that naturalizing discourses are used to authorize social power. Currently, there is a struggle in many Christian denominations for the power to direct the future practices of the Church. Same-sex marriage marks the site of that struggle.

As Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) point out, discourses that construct aspects of human social life as “natural” render them outside of human agency and control. Naturalizing homosexuality, in fact, allows liberal Christians to state that homosexuality is actually ordained by God (Thumma 1991). The rite of marriage, therefore, must be extended to same-sex couples if the Church is to deal with them as Jesus would. This view is understood to be in opposition to an evangelical perspective, which claims that only heterosexuality is natural while condemning homosexuality as unnatural. Evangelicals purport that in marriage men and women exist in a complementary relationship and together reflect the wholeness of God's character. Hence marriage must be reserved for heterosexual couples in order to replicate the natural order established by God at creation.

LGBT Christians negotiate between these competing discourses in their churches. They contribute to the naturalizing arguments of liberals at times, while at other times, they resist them in an effort to preserve their sexual agency. Many LGBT people do, in fact, experience their sexuality as natural, arising from deep, unconscious

drives rooted in innate, physical causes. Nonetheless, many of the LGBT people I talked to had previous heterosexual experiences and some confessed to the occasional heterosexual attraction. Despite the complexity of their personal sexual experiences, LGBT participants frequently naturalize sexual orientation, thereby simplifying the representation of their sexualities. There is a minority discourse, however, among the LGBT Christians I spoke with that bypasses the familiar categories of sexual orientation with innovative contentions for a personal sexual agency that has the potential to shift the premise of the debate.

In order to explore this situation, I engaged in participant-observation in mainline churches in upstate New York from 1995 until 2000. During the year 2000, I interviewed 64 people including 18 individuals who actively opposed the inclusion of LGBT Christians in their churches. They referred to themselves as “evangelicals.” I also interviewed 23 people who actively promoted including LGBT Christians in their churches. They referred to themselves as “liberals.” These 41 people were mostly ministers of local mainline denominations in a small, postindustrial city in upstate New York. I also interviewed 23 self-identified LGBT Christians. During the course of participant observation and interviews it became clear that the status of LGBT Christians in the mainline was, in their view, epitomized by the debate over same-sex marriage.

In the United States, one common script for sexuality is founded on the presumption that sexuality is a physically predetermined, perhaps genetic, attribute of every individual. Sexuality is naturalized. Like gender, it is constructed not as a matter of personal choice or social relations, but rather, it is an inborn state, independent of and a priori to social relations (Gavanas 2001; Rubin 1984). According to this discourse, we no more choose our sexuality than we chose our genitals. In fact, gender and sexuality are constructed in parallel ways: each is understood as first and foremost a physical fact, dictated to us by our bodies, experienced differently over time but with a sense of continuity. According to this model, gender is completely consonant with biological sex (Rubin 1984). Furthermore, for the heterosexual, sexuality is mapped directly onto attributes of the gender-biological sex construct. Men are aggressive, strong, sexually active and promiscuous. On the other hand, women are nurturing, weaker and more passive. They are less likely to have as many sexual partners as men and inhibit men’s sexual drive by demanding monogamy (Gavanas 2001; Lienesch 1993). These gender attributes are directly tied to an evolutionary model of reproductive fitness (Fausto-Sterling 1992).

According to a liberal variation on this discourse, homosexual relations are also natural, occurring between two people of the same gender-sex, and are characterized by egalitarian relations in the couple. Therefore, gender remains consonant with biological sex, and the consensual formula for moral sexuality is emphasized (Seidman 1992). This is the language of Gay Civil Rights (Kitzinger 1987; Spargo 1999; Warner 1999; Weston 1991). Liberal humanism posited a universal subject with universal rights. This abstraction, the generic agent, allowed a society to imagine, as articulated by Meyers that “what is morally significant about people is what they have in common” (1994:23). Maintaining the universal and generic agent, liberal humanism argued that the only difference between a homosexual person and a heterosexual person was sexual object choice (Pharr 1988). According to liberalism, homosexuality is as normal, natural and healthy as heterosexuality. By denying agency in sexuality, gay civil rights activists and the liberal ideology that supports them also deny moral culpability for sexuality.

This logic is in an oppositional relationship to the conservative Christian discourse that constructs heterosexuality as natural while framing homosexuality as either an unfortunate pathology or as a sin for which one is morally culpable (Ankerberg and Weldon 1994; Focus on the Family 2000). Heterosexuality, according to this view, is natural because it maps so completely onto gender constructions that are seen as absolutely tied to biological sex. Homosexuality, therefore, perverts the mission and purpose of gender-sex. It makes men receptive partners, women penetrative partners and denies the importance of reproduction in sexuality. The leadership of the male in the home and the love and nurture of the female are rendered obsolete (Gavanas 2001; Lienesch 1993). The social order is confounded.

Feminist anthropologists have sought to denaturalize the one-to-one correspondence between gender and sex in order to undermine the power inherent in this construction (Butler 1990; Fulkerson 1997; Rich 1980; Rubin 1975, 1984; Vance 1989). Rubin distinguished biological sex from social gender and argued that the “sex/gender system is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (1975:159). Critiquing Levi-Strauss’s work on marriage and kinship, Rubin argued that the sexual division of labour that appears to be universal is based not on biology but on a need to insure a “reciprocal state of dependency between the sexes” (1975:178). Discourses that naturalize the two-sex gender system are, therefore, employed to naturalize an obligatory heterosexuality (Rich 1980; Rubin 1975; Vance 1989). Along with Foucault, Rubin

(1984) argues that while sexuality is understood as the naturally occurring libido struggling against social constraints, sexual desires, in fact, are constituted in historical, social practices. She challenges the notion that what is defined as “sexuality” is a natural category of behaviour.

Reiterating Schneider’s (1972) critique of kinship studies, Yanagisako and Collier (1987) also pointed out the inextricable connections between kinship and dichotomized gender differences. They rejected the notion that gender differences are cultural elaborations on the biological fact of sex differences and argued instead, following Bourdieu’s concept of embodiment, that one’s experience of the body is culturally constructed and socially structured from its inception. In other words, there is no pre-social gender or sexuality.

Taking this argument at step further, some scholars question the characterization of anatomical sex as a pre-social, culturally unmediated, biological reality. Judith Butler explicates the multiple ways in which sexual desire, gender and anatomical sex are conflated and constructed as a “metaphysical unity” (1990:22). She argues that naturalizing sexual desire, gender and sex is necessary for maintaining the sexual binary of male and female. Separating gender from sex is not adequate to denaturalize sexual power relations because it leaves the biologically category of sex unchallenged and unproblematized. Arguing along these lines, Fulkerson says, “When gender is opposed to the category of sex, it construes the sexed body as a “given.”...As long as subjects are viewed as sexed [male and female] prior to the considerations of power relationships, some notion of gender is operative” (1997:191). It would be more useful, she argues, to recognize that “sex’ as well as gender is something one becomes—or is done to one” (Fulkerson 1997:191). Thus, even the body is a cultural construction and cannot be understood as a primal reality proceeding social and cultural mediation.

Naturalizing discourses, as Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) point out, are power discourses. By critiquing the naturalizing discourses that construct gender, sex and sexuality, feminists are able to challenge the sense that they are inevitable features of the social landscape (Tsing 1995; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). Sexuality, sex and gender, if they are socially constructed, can be put together in a variety of ways, permitting different power relationships between people. Rather than asking to what categories persons belong, the question then becomes what are the relations between categories of persons and how do they reveal power hierarchies? First, I turn to the discourses of liberal Christians in mainline denominations who advocate for same-sex marriage. Through these dis-

courses I begin to examine the means of categorizing people according to sexual orientation and the resulting claim for the power to direct church practices.

Liberal Christians: Naturalizing Homosexuality

The liberal mainline participants in this research employed naturalizing discourses about sexual orientation that claimed that homosexuality was fixed at birth, immutable and at least in part biologically determined. Discourses that construct aspects of human social life as “natural” render them outside of human agency and control (Franklin 1997; Tsing 1995; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). Arguing that homosexuality is biologically determined and a part of the natural order means that an individual cannot help being gay or lesbian and is not required to change. In fact, naturalizing discourses of sexual orientation allow liberal Christians to state that homosexuality is a state ordained by God. Additionally, they argue that God’s design is progressively revealed by science and found in nature (Lawrence 1989). Naturalizing homosexuality, therefore, makes a claim on both scientific rationality and the divine purpose of God. Framed by scientific discourses, homosexuality is rendered explainable, functional and unalterable. Therefore, the liberal mainline participants are able to argue that the homosexual is an acceptable human variation, part of God’s plan for human sexuality (Thumma 1991). Following liberal principles of equality and justice, therefore, same-sex couples cannot properly be denied access to the rites of marriage (Tronto 1993). In this way, liberal Christians authorize their own positions on the future of church practices and legitimize their claim on the power to direct this future.

The liberal research participants repeatedly claimed that science and their own personal experience indicated that homosexuality was, in the words of one participant, “part of the natural order of creation.” As one minister put it,

My judgement is that [homosexuality] is innate—something we’re born with...because we all know that in this society lesbians [and] gays...are ostracized. Why would somebody want to choose to be ostracized? A very strange choice especially when it’s as much as 10% of the population maybe more. Why would that large of a population be choosing to be ostracized?

This statement emphasizes the idea that sexual orientation is beyond human agency because it is natural (Franklin 1997; Tsing 1995; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). The participant makes this statement based on his personal judgment which is in keeping with the liberal Chris-

tian reliance on rationality and experience rather than solely on scripture.

When making claims that sexual orientation is natural, the research participants are arguing that one's orientation is formed primarily by genetic and other physical components (Abramson and Pinkerton 1995; Fausto-Sterling 1992). They are not, however, ruling out that social and psychological factors might contribute to the development of sexual orientation (Wieringa 1989). As one participant said, "I'm sure as we go along the science of genetics is going to bear some fruit about how sexuality is related to genetics and how it's related to nurture." This is what Schwalbe (1996) has called a "loose essentialism." In the words of one participant, "I think that there are multiple factors that influence people's sexual orientation. I think they're genetic, I think they're hormonal, they're cultural."

The liberal participants are clear, however, that whatever environmental factors contribute, sexual orientation cannot be prevented or cured. Homosexuality in their view is not pathological, but rather a normal variation of a broader human sexuality. Furthermore, one's sexual orientation, they argue, once fixed is intractable (Franklin 1997; Rubin 1984; Spargo 1999; Warner 1999; Weston 1991). Therefore, they claim it is cruel and even immoral to try to make a lesbian or gay person become heterosexual. Because one's sexual orientation is natural, liberal Christians argue that it is ordained by God (Thumma 1991). As one minister told me, "Homosexuality is genetically determined and I am not willing to say that God is making a mistake."

However, when pressed many of the participants admitted to great uncertainty concerning the causes of homosexuality (Gavanas 2001; Schwalbe 1996; Wieringa 1989). Some participants contradicted themselves in the course of the interview and ultimately admitted that factors determining sexual orientation were unimportant. For example, one participant said, "I think there probably are people for whom it is a choice. I'm certain there are people for whom it isn't a choice. To me it doesn't matter...I think love is love."

As is evident from the quote above, many of the participants acknowledged that sexuality was more slippery than the rigid dichotomy of homosexual and heterosexual. They frequently framed the fluid and unpredictable tendencies of sexual desire in terms of bisexuality. Questions about bisexuality were not on my interview schedule. Despite the fact that only one participant out of the total pool claimed a bisexual identity, several participants in all three groups brought it up spontaneously as they worked through the ramifications of extending marriage to same-sex partners.

According to the mainline liberals, bisexuality is a natural sexual orientation which, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, is fixed at birth. Unlike homosexuality or heterosexuality, however, bisexuality allows the bisexual a choice in the object of sexual desire. The liminality of bisexuality, its place between the homosexual-heterosexual opposition, is understood by the liberal participants as particularly problematic to the conservatives in the Church who wish to preserve marriage as a heterosexual institution.

Bisexuality did indeed trouble the evangelical mainline people who talked to me. The evangelical participants see bisexuality as an example of an unstable, unpredictable sexuality without limits. They also brought up bisexuality spontaneously during interviews. More than one minister said things resembling the following statement,

There's a fear in the conservative theological community...[they ask], "What's the next step?" If someone is bisexual and they're not monogamous, do three adults in a sexually compatible relationship constitute a family?

The liberal participants, on the other hand, claimed they were not disturbed by the apparent unstable nature of sexuality suggested by bisexuality. Instead, the liberal mainline participants naturalized bisexuality as another category situated between homosexuality and heterosexuality on a continuum of sexual orientation, but just as fixed, innate and natural as the other two (Wieringa 1989). This naturalizing discourse allows them to sharpen the contrast between their liberal values and rationality and the irrational fear of other sexualities they imagine evangelicals to harbour. Since the liberal participants frame the opposition to same-sex marriage as arising from homophobia, they argue that those opposed to same-sex marriage are psychologically uncomfortable with homoeroticism (Kitzinger 1987; Nugent 1997; Pharr 1988; Weeks 1991). Some of the liberal mainline informants believe that bisexuality is particularly problematic to evangelicals because its existence allows one to imagine large numbers of people hiding in heterosexual relationships but who are plagued with same-sex desires. For example, a liberal mainline minister told me,

If sexuality conforms to the usual statistical bell curve, there's a whole middle of that curve that nobody's talking about....In Kinsey's research, there was a continuum hypothesized...[Bisexuality] is a possibility. In other words,...there are a lot of us up for grabs. And that is disconcerting to deal with. We don't deal with it. It simply is not discussed....It means the possibility that there are an awful lot of people uncomfortable with

their sexuality no matter which way they make their ultimate commitment.

The speaker highlights the rational basis of accepting bisexuals along with lesbian and gay Christians into the “full life of the Church.” By implying that evangelicals have an irrational fear of their own sexual desire, he implicitly underscores the propriety of the liberal position in directing the future of church practices.

Despite the tacit acknowledgment of many of the participants that sexual orientation is more fluid than the prominent discourse in the Church allows, many of the mainline liberals choose to purposefully discuss sexual orientation as if it were fixed at birth and immutable over the course of one’s life. Constructing sexuality as an innate aspect of a person at birth is a strategy which simplifies the arguments in the debate over the morality of homosexuality, for example:

The concept that [homosexuality is] not something someone chooses is a very strong playing card whether or not I totally think that it’s true. I think there is choice involved for a lot of people, not for everybody, but for some people...But, I wouldn’t tell somebody that if I was trying to convince them. [Educating the Church about this] would make the discussion harder.

The liberal mainline participants place homosexuality and bisexuality in the natural order created by God (Thumma 1991). Despite their own uncertainty about the factors determining sexual orientation, they purposefully claim that it is innate and immutable. If, however, they can successfully argue that homosexuality is natural, then it logically follows that God made homosexuality. Since God created homosexuality, the liberal participants argue it follows that homosexual relationships are capable of meeting the Christian criteria for sexual morality. Therefore, they continue, LGBT Christians must be permitted to solemnize their relationships in the Church. Marriage is the rite in Christian practice that transforms ordinary sexual relationships into sacred covenants. Furthermore, because these research participants are liberals they expect society to improve through human intervention based on justice and equality (Kitzinger 1987; Tronto 1993; Weeks 1995; Young 1990). They believe, therefore, that LGBT people should have access not only to the rite of Christian marriage but to secular marriage. In the debate about same-sex marriage, Christian rites and civil rights are often conflated and the distinctions between them are blurred. In a less than fully conscious way, naturalizing homosexuality is a political strategy to facilitate change in the policies of their denominations.

The discourses of the liberal mainline do not exist in a social vacuum but are rather in structural opposition to the evangelical discourses that are concerned with sexuality. Both liberals and evangelicals evoke reason and nature to underscore their interpretations of Christian morality. Both are attempting to make a claim on the power to direct the future practices of the Church.

Evangelicals and the Sexual Order Established at Creation

As the liberal participants illustrate, the naturalizing discourse concerned with the causes of homosexuality is pivotal in the legitimization of same-sex marriage. For the evangelical participants these arguments are points of contestation. Shifting between the languages of science and religion, the evangelical mainline participants naturalize gender and concomitant sexual desire while denaturalizing sexual orientation. This discourse allows them to assign gender ontological status while denying that status to sexual orientation, thereby situating heterosexuality in the creation order established by God (Gavanas 2001). The heterosexual structure of marriage is determined by ontological claims that naturalize a two-sex gender system linked to naturalized expectations of heterosexual desire (Rich 1980; Rubin 1984).

The mainline evangelicals argue that sexual responsiveness and desire are determined by gender (Gavanas 2001; Lienesch 1993). In this regard, they are not unlike some of the liberal and LGBT participants. They, however, construct a much more rigid gender dichotomy and employ it as the basis for a discourse which posits heterosexuality as the only natural and morally acceptable sexual expression. Male and female attributes are imagined by evangelicals as natural, biological characteristics and constructed in complementary opposition to each other. This not only provides the underpinnings for obligatory heterosexuality; it also provides the logic for monogamous, heterosexual marriage (Lienesch 1993; Rich 1980). Men are understood to be sexually aggressive and naturally promiscuous. Women are, on the contrary, understood to be sexually passive and biologically programmed to be nurturing (Gavanas 2001; Lienesch 1993; Rubin 1984). Sex in marriage, therefore, is imagined as the glue that keeps men and women together (Ellison 1993; Graf 1999). It creates a stable family unit. As one evangelical Episcopalian woman told me,

There are enormous differences between men and women’s sexuality. Feminists have spent 30 years ignoring those to the detriment of women. Women are emotionally relational. This accounts for the differences

between homosexual men and lesbians. Lesbians are relational and are not prone to compulsive, anonymous sex like homosexual men. I am dealing in stereotypes here, but men have a powerful, enormous desire to have sex. Women want that and they desire a long-term relationship. Women have a powerful impulse for marriage and family. Men need a powerful motivation to make a lifelong commitment to women. When marriage is the only legitimate place for sexual expression men are motivated to stick around and raise the kids together.

As evident from the quote above, heterosexual intercourse in marriage is understood as the root of family stability. In American culture, sexual intercourse symbolizes the “enduring, diffuse solidarity” believed to be embedded at the heart of the nuclear family (Schneider 1980:52). The complementarity of gender as it is expressed in sexual intercourse is endowed with multivalent meanings. Heterosexual intercourse in this discourse is the bringing together of two halves to make a whole (Gavanas 2001; Nugent and Gramick 1990). For many of the evangelical Christians I spoke to, the complementarity of gender reflects the wholeness of the image of God. They argue that God created male and female in His image and that heterosexual intercourse in its proper context (marriage) recreates that wholeness (Gavanas 2001). Braiding together naturalizing discourses and scripture, evangelicals authorize their own social power in the claim that not only their theology but also their sexuality is in line with the will of God.

According to the evangelical participants, God intended gender to be the site of meaningful contrast (Ankerberg and Weldon 1994; Focus on the Family 2000). God created sexual intercourse between men and women in marriage to be the arena in which wholeness is made possible (Gavanas 2001). Kath Weston (1991) argues gay and lesbian people challenge the discourse that constructs gender as the site of complementary difference required to make sexual union meaningful. This is clear in the statement made by the research participants. As one UCC minister said,

The proscription of homosexuality is not just mores or taboos. It is an accurate portrayal of God’s design. Gender was created with complementarity. This is self-evidently obvious. It’s how things work. Like electrical equipment, you don’t put two male ends and two female ends together.

This describes what theologian M. Hellwig characterized as the “classical myth of sexuality” which proposed that “God has created people according to a blueprint which is written in their bodies, in their anatomy;

they are made to operate in a certain way, and when they operate in that way, their mission and purpose is fulfilled” (Nugent and Gramick 1990:34). In this logic maleness and femaleness are ontological realities and heterosexuality is God’s design for wholeness, a wholeness that reflects the nature of God (Gavanas 2001; Lienesch 1993; Rubin 1984).

Same-sex erotic relationships, according to this discourse, cannot produce wholeness because the two halves are the same. Since there is no difference to generate meaning, the relationship lacks the power to create a “greater totality” both between the lovers and in terms of procreation (Weston 1991:137). Same-sex unions merely replicate the partners and mirror them back to each other in a narcissistic sexuality not unlike masturbation (Rubin 1984; Weston 1991). Because of the disruption to gender’s ontological status in the Judeo-Christian worldview, same-sex unions are understood as profoundly asocial and unnatural, thus preserving the unique legitimacy of heterosexual marriage. Or put more simply, one evangelical participant said, “How can two men and two women together be whole?”

Discourses that naturalize a supposed gender complementarity ensure that heterosexuality is constructed as obligatory (Lienesch 1993; Rich 1980). Though heterosexuality is God’s design and is evident in creation, it is not unassailable. According to the evangelical participants, heterosexuality is natural but not impenetrable to cultural influences (Gavanas 2001). Evangelicals construct sexual desire as a malleable feature of sexuality. For instance, while listening to *The Gospel Hour* on Christian radio, I once heard a sermon on Romans, chapter 1, a popular text used to condemn homosexuality. The minister argued that homosexual desire begins in one’s fantasy life and, if one dwells on it, will inevitably be acted upon. He used the verse which says, “God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper” (Rom.1:28 NAS) to argue that people are vulnerable to the images to which they expose themselves. He claimed if Christians allow themselves to be exposed to images of homosexual acts in pornography they “get hooked on them” and their natural heterosexual desires can be overridden. Sexual desires are in a sense contagious; external forces present in the media and in society can influence anyone. Hence, any media representations of homosexuality as normal are inherently dangerous.

In this discourse, sexual orientation is not innate or immutable. The evangelical mainline Christians I spoke with argued that while God ordained heterosexuality, sexual orientation is not fixed. One minister said explicitly that boys’ sexual identities are more fluid than are girls’ and that for boys some homosexual experimentation is

normal.³ Homosexuality may be a developmental stage, but according to this participant, it's not a morally acceptable lifestyle. While all sexual expression outside of heterosexual marriage is considered sinful, sexual orientation is constructed as more fluid and situational than it is among liberal and LGBT Christians. Homosexuality is denaturalized.

Ironically, denaturalizing homosexuality places these arguments in an interesting parallel with queer theorists who support a fluid and contextualized sexuality that is responsive to social conditions (Dorenkamp and Henke 1995; Foucault 1978; Wilchins 1997). In the words of one lay Episcopalian woman,

There are multiple factors that shape sexual identity. It is not useful to talk about sexual orientation like there are two groups or even three or four. Sexual orientation is not fixed or immutable. You're not just born with it. Rather there is a complex mixture of biology, genetics, socialization and social patterns, actions and habits, and fantasies we form. One formally gay man I know sees things in his family and socialization that led him to be attracted to men. He was born more sensitive and was more vulnerable to social conditioning than his brother who is straight. It was a combination of factors. He realized that he had to take some responsibility for allowing himself to engage in [gay] fantasy. Porn helped condition his sexual response. He had an abusive father so he hungered for father love and father touch. He transferred this to sex with men.

Of course, queer theorists and the evangelicals have different aims when constructing sexuality as fluid. In the evangelical discourse homosexuality is not merely denaturalized but also constructed as unnatural. It is frequently constructed as a pathology similar to compulsive behaviours like alcoholism. One UMC minister told me, "Just because someone has a genetic disposition does not make it moral."

Shifting to the language of religion they claim that homosexual desire is a product of sin. On one level, homosexual desire is caused by the individual's willingness to be habituated to it through pornography as exemplified by the quote above. On a more universal level, homosexual desire and other sinful compulsions are caused by the fall from grace that occurred in the Garden of Eden. The doctrine of original sin posits that because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, sin entered the world. One Presbyterian minister told me,

[Saying] "God made me gay or lesbian" is most problematic....People who argue that [homosexuality] is a natural variation don't take the Fall seriously....Humans

have Sin. Not sin with a small "s," but Sin with a capital "S." Sin is a condition in which we all live. The whole of creation is impacted.

In contrast with the naturalizing discourse of the liberal mainline, they argue that what occurs naturally is not necessarily God's perfect will for humanity or the world. Because of what some Christians refer to as humanity's "sin nature," what is experienced as natural is suspect. People's natural impulses are only good, they claim, when they are in line with God's commands. God's commands, according to evangelicals, are revealed in scripture. These participants repeatedly returned to the biblical story of creation to define what is both natural and good.

Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) have argued that origin narratives such as the biblical creation story link identities to ontological constructions. In this case, the Genesis account naturalizes the dichotomized gender system. From the beginning, there were two distinct beings, male and female that had distinct and complementary ontological status. A Christian can, therefore, extrapolate God's plan for heterosexuality. Repeatedly, research participants would refer to the order of creation to argue that homosexuality is outside of the will of God. For instance, Presbyterian minister who spoke to me said,

The more powerful argument supporting heterosexual marriage is from creation. I see in the orders of creation, as described in Genesis and other scriptures, how things ought to be. I see in the orders of creation the fundamental structuring of marriage as one man and one woman. The fact that humans are made in the image of God, both men and women implies, first, that men and women are equally made in the image of God. It also implies the complementary nature of differences. There's intercourse and the complementary nature of male and female bodies. And there's complementary roles, complementary strengths. Feminists want women and men to be exactly the same. But the pattern is set in the orders of creation.

Naturalizing gender and assigning the sexes distinct ontological status, evangelicals postulate an orderly creation established by God (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). In marriage, men and women exist in a complementary relationship and together reflect the wholeness of God's character. Hence, marriage must be preserved for heterosexual couples in order to re-enact the order established by God at creation. Laying claim to the ontological primacy of heterosexuality, evangelicals are clearly playing for the power to make decisions regarding the future practices of the church.

Both liberals and evangelicals in the mainline denominations have a clear image of “the homosexual” seeking inclusion in the Church. Their competing discourses are vying for the power to frame the arguments as well as controlling the representations of LGBT Christians. LGBT Christians are not absent, however, from the conversation and are themselves constructing discourses regarding both their sexuality and access to same-sex marriage.

LGBT Christians Negotiating Sexual Histories

Naturalizing homosexuality is the primary discourse in mainline Christianity that justifies same-sex marriage. Many LGBT people, in fact, experience their sexuality as natural, arising from deep, unconscious drives rooted in innate, physical causes (Rubin 1984; Spargo 1999; Weston 1991). When recounting their “coming out” narratives, gay, lesbian and bisexual people talk about discovering or uncovering their sexual orientations (Gorman 1997; Weston 1991). Yet, the rigid categories delineating sexual orientation are assaulted by the experience that sexuality has a tendency to shift during the course of one’s life. Despite the formulaic narratives in which one discovers an essentialized homosexuality, many of the LGBT people I talked to had previous heterosexual experiences and some confessed to the occasional heterosexual attraction.

The LGBT participants naturalize sexual orientation despite their personal sexual experiences. Like their liberal Christian counterparts, this naturalizing discourse allows them to claim that homosexuality is beyond an individual’s control (Foucault 1978; Rubin 1984; Spargo 1999; Weston 1991). Therefore, they argue either that homosexuality is ordained by God or, at least, that they are not morally culpable for their sexuality (Davidson 1992; Fulkerson 1997; Thumma 1991). Even as most of the LGBT participants utilize discourses that naturalize sexual orientation, some employ discourses that resist essentialized representations of their sexuality. Moving beyond the discourses characterizing some sexuality as moral, natural or normal, these participants reserve the right to eschew categories (Warner 1999; Wilchins 1997). This discursive strategy is not fully articulated nor is it fully intentional. Yet, it creates an avenue for these LGBT Christians to retain control of their sexual identities and experiences bypassing the logic which normalizes and sanctions some sexualities while vilifying others.

Almost without exception, the LGBT people I spoke with told me their coming out narratives (Gorman 1997; Weston 1991). I was not intending to gather this information and at times had to curtail the detail that people

offered me. Weston (1991) talks about the formula structuring most coming out stories which focus on the process of sexual self-discovery. By recording their coming out stories, I inadvertently garnered the sexual histories of most of the LGBT participants. Beyond that, however, many of them offered me detailed recitations of their sexual pasts which I never solicited. These stories were sometimes humorous and sometimes confessional.⁴ Whatever motivated the outpouring of this information, as a result of it, I am privy to the sexual histories of many of the LGBT people with whom I spoke.

Categorizing people based on sexual orientation, as their sexual histories illustrate, is a tricky business. Sexual desire and sexual orientation are fluid aspects of individual experience and identity (Rubin 1984; Warner 1999; Wilchins 1997). It was not unusual for the participants’ identification with a sexual orientation to shift throughout their lives. At least seven of the 23 LGBT people I spoke with for this research, roughly 30%, had been married or involved in long term relationships with members of the “opposite sex” prior to claiming a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity.⁵ It is also true that sexual orientation shifts in the other direction and that other people I knew in the community had at some point in their lives claimed gay or lesbian identities now claim heterosexual identities or are involved in long term heterosexual relationships.

Sexual desire and sexual attraction are as problematic as sexual orientation because they also tend to be unstable and fluid, varying with one’s age, physical condition, even the time of day, certainly the time of the month. Finally, sexual desire and one’s stated sexual orientation could at times conflict. The people I spoke with report that they can find themselves suddenly and perhaps temporarily attracted to people of the “opposite” sex. Due to such problems some queer theorists have challenged the notion that sexual orientation exists as a natural and stable aspect of personhood beyond the reach of cultural and social construction (Foucault 1978; Sedgwick 1990; Spargo 1999; Warner 1993, 1999). However, in the common parlance of the people I spoke with, sexual orientation was understood as an objective reality and a useful tool by which to characterize people.

Identifying oneself as gay, lesbian or bisexual frequently creates a conflict with traditional Christian morality (Comstock 1996; Dynes 1992; Yip 1997). Sexual morality in traditional Christian discourse is linked with a naturalized heterosexuality (Ankerberg and Weldon 1994; Focus on the Family 2000; Gavanas 2001; Nugent and Gramick 1990). Leaving aside all of the competing discourses in American Christianity which dispute this statement, the lesbian and gay participants I spoke to for this

research understood this to be the basic conflict which they must navigate as sexual and spiritual people. They understand that within Christianity a sexuality or gender expression that is deemed unnatural is sinful.

Like their liberal Christian counterparts, most participants argued that sexual orientation is innate. Naturalizing homosexuality allows them to argue that God made them gay or lesbian (Davidson 1992; Fulkerson 1997; Thumma 1991). For instance, one 28-year-old African American man argued that gay and lesbian people were "born that way." He made this claim despite his previous heterosexual experiences and his occasional attraction to certain women. This was important to him because it allowed him to claim that God intended him to be gay and therefore God could not condemn his homosexuality. He said to me, "I say you were born with it...I'm not saying I question God, but...we can't help it. I didn't ask to be born like this." Struggling with a conception of homosexuality as sin, he argued that he could not be held morally responsible for his sexual orientation. This man claimed throughout the interview that God could not condemn homosexuality because He created it. Thumma refers to this line of reasoning among gay evangelical Christians as the "creationist argument" which they use to posit sexual orientation as an immutable attribute assigned by God (1991:341).

Other LGBT participants naturalize homosexuality to argue more positively that it is part of God's design for humanity (Davidson 1992; Fulkerson 1997). As one lesbian told me, "God has created me as I am to serve some purpose. He's not going to send me to hell." A reified concept of nature is frequently conflated with God's will (Tsing 1995; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). For instance, a 37-year-old white man argued, "I think Mother Nature... said, 'Now wait a minute. The world is over-populated.' Homosexuals are on this earth to slow down the population growth a little bit." In this statement he gives homosexuality a positive function which therefore constructs it as potentially good and useful. It is ironic that he adopted this argument since he is the father of two children. In fact 43% of the LGBT participants are parents (Lewin 1990, 1993). Most of them had children from previous heterosexual relationships.⁶

The sexual histories of these participants indicate that sexual orientation is not always consistent with sexual object choice. Naturalizing homosexuality renders the heterosexual experiences of these gay and lesbian people invisible. Furthermore, the line between sexual desires and sexual experience is confused by the fact that sexuality has a tendency to shift during the course of one's life. This confusion is exemplified by what one 33-year-old white man told me,

I think a lot of people are born with [homosexuality]. I think you can choose it. I think you can choose any [sexual orientation], but I think you have stronger feelings. I think that most true gay people were born that way—to be gay. But, I think they have the right and they can choose to live a heterosexual life if they want to. Not that they're going to be happy or that they're going to be faithful. It's such a funny word—you can choose but then you can't choose.

This participant is struggling with a way to talk about his experience of sexuality as in some sense beyond his control, and yet, not beyond his modification.

The idea that gay, lesbian and bisexual people choose their sexual orientation is problematic to LGBT Christians because it is a discursive strategy used by evangelical Christians to condemn same-sex eroticism (Ankerberg and Weldon 1994; Focus on the Family 2000; Gavanas 2001; Herman 2000). One participant, a conservative Pentecostal, articulates this position. His case highlights the internal divisions of the LGBT community. Despite his gay identity, he refutes the primary liberal discourse that would permit him access to the rituals of the Church and, indeed, to heaven. While he reported that he has always been exclusively homosexual in desire and practice, he rejects the notion that sexual orientation is natural or created by God and accepts the literal interpretation of biblical texts condemning homosexuality. He asserted,

I don't think you're born gay...that'd be blasphemy. That would make God a hypocrite because God speaks in the Bible and it clearly says in the Bible that men shall not be lovers of themselves [*sic*]. Because it says if men are lovers of themselves you won't be able to get to heaven. That's that. God made men and He made women.

I asked him, "Do you think you're going to hell?"
He replied, "I don't know."

This participant was the only one who definitively argued that homosexuality is unnatural. During the course of the interviews, all but a very small minority of the LGBT people claimed that their homosexuality was inborn and outside of their ability to change. They, therefore, argue that it is natural and link the natural to what God ordained (Franklin 1997; Thumma 1991; Tsing 1995; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). Discourses such as these construct some orientations as morally acceptable by virtue of their naturalness and consign other sexualities as unnatural and, in Christian discourse, sinful (Warner 1999).

Nonetheless, the way in which categories of sexual orientation restrict people and the fluidity of people's

experience were noted by some of the participants. These LGBT Christians resist the naturalizing discourse of sexual orientation. Several people saw the homosexual-heterosexual binary as too restrictive (Wilchins 1997). In an effort to open up liberating sexual discourses and bypass moral judgments, one self-identified gay man argued that the fluidity of sexual desire should be cultivated. He suggested that intentionally adopting bisexuality would be the most liberating approach, saying,

Young people right now are considering themselves bisexual, not considering themselves gay or straight. I almost feel that I want to view my life that way also. Because once you put yourself into a category you tend to conform to that category and then you never allow yourself to go in another direction...I think we have to be open and adaptable to all people rather than just categorizing ourselves....I think it's a very healthy way of thinking, much healthier than thinking that you're totally gay or straight....Our sexuality is allowing nature to be nature. It's allowing you to go with the flow, go with the chi of the whole thing.

Unlike the liberal Christian participants who use the category of bisexuality to fix and essentialize unpredictable and shifting sexual desires, some of the gay men who participated in this research adopted a pan-sexuality as part of a discourse embracing and expanding on the fluidity of sexual desires and practices.

Some lesbians also resisted the naturalizing discourse of sexual orientation. They sought to avoid categories altogether and establish the power of their own agency in choosing sexual partners. In this way they bypass entirely the discussion of sinful and acceptable sexualities. One 47-year-old white woman experienced the naturalizing arguments as disempowering. She reserved her claim to choose a lover. When I asked her if she was born lesbian she told me,

I don't really know. I want to say that this was a conscious choice I made to be with [my partner]. I don't ever remember being in a situation where I felt like I wanted to be with a woman before....So, when somebody makes the comment, "Oh, yes, it's all genetic and you know there's something with their hormones," or whatever, it just makes me angry because I think there are people out there that never had that [feeling] and yet some person crosses their path and it just hits them like a ton of bricks.

LGBT Christians both utilize and resist the discourse naturalizing homosexuality. Many of the lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians I talked to engaged in naturalizing

discourse which parallel the liberal mainline participants. This strategy allows them to claim either that their homosexuality is God ordained or, at least, they are not choosing to engage in sin. This discourse clearly links what is deemed natural with what is morally acceptable (Fulker-son 1997; Thumma 1991). Like the liberal participants, naturalizing homosexuality is a discursive strategy by which gay and lesbian Christians can insist on the power to access the full rites of the Church including marriage. However, naturalizing discourses are also restrictive (Spargo 1999; Warner 1999; Wilchins 1997). They delineate what sexualities are acceptable and what is not acceptable. Some of the LGBT Christians I spoke with resisted this aspect of the discourse. Without fully formulating counter-discourses, they argue that sexual desire cannot and should not be neatly separated into rigid categories. By resisting the naturalizing discourse of essentialized sexual orientations, these participants step outside of the discursive logic claiming some orientations as natural and morally acceptable while others are deemed sinful. They, thus, disengage from the power struggle in their churches and instead assert their own discursive agency to reframe the debate.

Conclusion

It must be pointed out that naturalizing discourses "emerge from each person's own experience" (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:12). Cultural constructions are experienced as "real," and are not simply political strategies used to vie for social power. For most Americans this means that cultural constructions are experienced as biological realities beyond the reach of social alteration. Liberal and evangelical mainline Christians construct gender and sexuality from ontological paradigms that are given in origin narratives and reinforced in daily life. If this is true then we must allow that these constructions of gender and sexuality are, in fact, real. If humans can not experience the body without the mediation of culture then the experience of cultural constructions are the only experiences. Experience, nonetheless, does, sometimes, contradict dominant discourses in culture. As Franklin (1997) points out, experience is unstable and contradictory. Cultural discourses assist people in either ignoring these troublesome experiences or reframing them by using an alternative script (Moore 1995). It is in the gap between culturally constructed experience and the hegemonic discourses which usually contain them that innovative and liberating opportunities arise.

Discourses about sexual orientation provide a set of ideas about sex, desire and gender and they limit those ideas by providing the language to talk about them. They

include patterned and predictable tools such as rhetorics, arguments and representations which, like pencils in a jar, can be brought out for particular jobs. The language provided by discourses does specific work. The naturalizing discourses about sexual orientation work to legitimate or condemn certain sexual desires. In this way they are useful in power struggles and political manoeuvring whether or not the speakers are fully conscious of the way they are using these tools.

Liberal and evangelical discourses require each other. They are structured in opposition to each other and as one set of discourses shifts the other set shifts to match it. Both liberal and evangelical Christians imagine a cohesive, unified LGBT community about which they develop arguments and strategies. These arguments and strategies, of course, have less to do with real LGBT people than with the power relations between liberals and evangelicals.

LGBT Christians are, at the same time, constructing discourses about sex, gender and spirituality. These discourses rely heavily on the hegemonic ones, but are also the site of innovations. Evoking "nature" simplifies the lived experience of sexual desire in order to make of it useful arguments and representations. Such simplification, however, ignores or renders invisible portions of sexual experience to the detriment of LGBT Christians. Refusing to engage in this power struggle, some LGBT Christians imagine different options and with these options reconcile shifting and flexible sexualities with their spirituality.

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Notes

- 1 Mainline denominations are large, powerful institutions that historically have acted as the arbiters of social values in the United States. They have built their credibility on an educated clergy and are marked by an ecumenical stance toward other denominations and faiths (Roof 1983; Roof and McKinney 1987). These are in contrast to fundamentalist denominations who intentionally distinguish themselves from the mainline. The two perspectives exist in opposition to each other each claiming historical and spiritual authenticity.
- 2 While I did not interview any transgendered Christians, I use the acronym LGBT, however, to acknowledge the presence of transgendered people in the Church.
- 3 James Dobson has made similar statements on his radio show and in his magazine.
- 4 The liberal and evangelical Christians I talked to, on the other hand, did not offer me this kind of information. Some

evangelicals, however, made a point of telling me that before they were married they had practiced celibacy and expected other Christians to do the same.

- 5 Only one woman in the LGBT sample identified herself as bisexual. She is married to a man and her sexual orientation is invisible under daily circumstances. Her case illustrates the ambiguity of categorizing people by sexual orientation.
- 6 One lesbian couple, however, had two children from alternative insemination. They are part of the so-called "lesbian baby boom" meaning that they purposefully sought out parenthood and are raising their children in an openly lesbian home in which they are both mothers to the children. Two other participants had children with opposite sex partners after they had identified themselves as gay and lesbian. They did not want long term relationships with these other people, but sought only to have children, in their words, "the natural way." See Lewin (1990, 1993).

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