

# Aborting Sex: Gay Rights as an Anti-Life Movement

D. Paul Sullins

**ABSTRACT:** Gay rights is not generally considered a life issue. But the social and cultural effects of same-sex sexual expression are remarkably similar to those of induced abortion. Like contraception, both contravene the natural operation of the body in order to conform human sexuality to the ideals of modernity – including unconditioned personal expression, availability to industrial capitalism, and reduced uncertainty in the life course. By severing the link between sex and children, both increase privatization, diminish the social intentionality and form of the sexual union, and undermine the unitive good and the transcendent goal of marriage. Movements for both gay rights and abortion rights employ similar rhetoric and share activist personnel, and gay rights activists strategically promote affinity with abortion rights. Unless proponents of human life engage such alignments on the cultural level, overcoming insularity and a narrow focus, direct issue engagement on abortion and on homosexuality risks becoming incoherent and counterproductive.

**G**AY RIGHTS is not generally considered a “life issue” such as abortion, infanticide, or euthanasia – the three issues that usually worry those concerned about the value of human life in our time. For these issues the rhetoric of life is used to oppose or to protest the taking of human life that, in contrast to criminalized homicide, is done with state or social sanction and devalues – literally dehumanizes – the life that is taken. We might say that the life issues, so classified, are really death issues. They are concerned with life principally when it is threatened unjustly by death. So, concern over legal abortion, with the specter of over a million unborn children slain, vastly outweighs any other life issue. Because, in large part, it results in so much more death, abortion is the pre-eminent problem among the life issues.

Yet abortion is also a life issue in another sense, because (unlike euthanasia or even infanticide) abortion also prevents the natural issue of new human life from sexual union. Abortion takes a life, but it also

interrupts a pregnancy and occurs proximally to conception. As a result, the prospect of abortion influences sexual behavior in a number of ways. This indirect, cultural effect of abortion, which is much more powerful than the direct harm caused by taking human lives, is, in its effect on the value of human life, remarkably similar to same-sex sexual expression. To clarify this claim we must consider a third, related practice: contraception.

The prospect of available abortion has a clearly discernible influence on sexual behavior as a means of ensuring the aims of those contracepting when their contraception fails. This link between contraception and abortion is hardly marginal in its effect on life. Empirically “most abortions are a result of contraceptive failure.”<sup>1</sup> The social importance of abortion to backstop contraception, moreover, constitutes a central legal justification for continuing abortion in the United States. In upholding *Roe v. Wade*, the 1992 Supreme Court opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* relied in part on “the fact that for two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail.” The opinion also noted that “in some critical respects the abortion decision is of the same character as the decision to use contraception.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether from this fact one laments that contraceptives were used at all, as Catholics tend to do, or that they were not used to better effect, as many Protestants do, it is clear that, in its function as the

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Westoff, *Recent Trends in Abortion and Contraception in 12 Counties* (Calverton MD: DHS Analytics, 2005), p. 27. According to the most recent data (2000-2001), 54% of American women having an abortion were using contraception when they became pregnant. See R.K. Jones, Jacqueline Darroch, & Stanley Henshaw, “Contraceptive Use Among U.S. Women Having Abortions in 2000-2001,” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 34 (2002): 294-303, Tables 1 and 2. This represents an estimated 51% of contraceptive failures that ended in abortion. In Westoff’s survey of twelve countries, the percent of contraceptive failures aborted in non-Muslim countries ranged from 55% to 91%.

<sup>2</sup> *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833. U.S. Sup. Ct. 1992, at II and III.A.2.

contraceptive of last resort, abortion not only enacts moral wrong directly but also introduces moral hazard into the social process of human reproduction.

#### Nullifying Nature

Contraception, abortion, and sodomy are similar and related practices inimical to life, in that they all contravene the natural operation of the body – specifically, the fertility of women’s bodies – in pursuit of an ethic of unconditioned sexual expression. In all three practices, the realm of bodily autonomy is expanded toward unconditioned freedom. Authenticity now lies, not in conformity to the body, but in choice that transcends its limits. Artificial contraception accomplishes this less invasively than abortion, which in turn thwarts the body’s intentions less fully than homosexual practice. These related practices have such strong affinities that they can be conceived as a common contraception-abortion-homosexuality complex (hereafter CAH for short), which progressively pursues the goal of reducing the contingencies or complications of sexual relations to result in a more predictable, individual, and isolated form of sexual expression. By contraception, a woman (and her partner) can enjoy sexual relations without the complication of pregnancy; by abortion, she can enjoy sexual relations assured to be without the complication of a child; by homosexuality, she can enjoy sexual relations without the complication of a man.<sup>3</sup>

The effect of such simplification is to rationalize sexual relations, conforming them both to the personal conditions of life in industrial capitalism and to the cultural ideals of advanced modernity. CAH has developed, it appears, in order to adapt human sexuality to the demands of modernity. Significantly, all three related practices have become widely practiced and largely socially acceptable only in the last century

---

<sup>3</sup> After proposing this as an abstract cultural association, I discovered that, in fact, “a vocal minority of lesbians (and a small number of gay men) explain their sexual orientation...as a means of escaping exploitative gender relations.” Rose Weitz and Karl Bryant, “The Portrayal of Homosexuality in Abnormal Psychology and Sociology of Deviance Textbooks,” *Deviant Behavior* 18 (1997): 27-46, at p. 34; see also Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 200-12.

or so. Together they counter the threat to the (post)modern order of what Mellor and Schilling describe as the “dangerous unpredictability of humanity’s embodied potentiality which is constantly threatening to break through the rational barriers constructed around humanity.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Contravening Children

CAH achieves this adaptation with modernity, of course, largely by dispensing with children. As any young parent can attest, children greatly complicate life in the rationalized modern systems of education, consumption, and labor. For both individual families and the social collective, the demands of production increasingly conflict with the demands of reproduction. The removal of children eases the demands on personal life and expedites the functioning of social systems oriented to orderly and rational behavior. CAH is thus, at root, a set of strategies for the removal of children from social life. Contraception-abortion, if practiced consistently, results in a family with no children; homosexual relations, if practiced universally, results in a society with no children.

Their common exclusion of children exposes a range of attendant cultural affinities between abortion and homosexuality. Relieved of the propagation of children, sexual expression has no necessary link to human sex differences. An appetite for the same sex, then, is the mirror image of a propensity to dispose of children. Because fertility is a bodily property of women, both abortion and homosexuality conform sexual relations to the male experience. Sexually, by abortion the woman becomes as free as a man; by homosexuality she becomes her own man. Just as (in Catholic thought) the denial of sexual complementarity that underlies homosexuality impairs human fullness, so the denial of the humanity of the fetus that underlies abortion is also a denial of his or her sexuality. The notion, moreover, that it is a positive good that God created people who do not desire to reproduce naturally goes hand in glove with the notion that conceiving a child naturally does not commit one to reproduction either.

Other cultural similarities between abortion and homosexual

---

<sup>4</sup> Philip Mellor and Chris Schilling, *Reforming the Body* (London UK: Sage Publications, 1977), p. 62, following George Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, translated by Bruce Boon (New York NY: Paragon House 1992), p. 52.

relations exist that are not so strongly linked to the exclusion of children. In criminology, both abortion and homosexuality have been considered, with prostitution and drug abuse, instances of “victimless crimes,” a class of criminal acts that leaves no victim to complain. Criminologists point out that such crimes are thereby largely unenforceable; sociologists infer that they are therefore not properly criminal, but deviant behaviors that have been criminalized as an expression of moral proscription.

Foucauldian social theory affirms the decriminalization of all three CAH practices as instances of the growing state administration of bodies in the interest of greater (albeit illusory) personal freedom. Memmi observes that past decades have seen “the decriminalization of corporal practices involving the beginning and end of life,” as French society, similar to American society, witnessed the conditional decriminalization of “contraception in 1967, abortion in 1975, sex change in 1976, and homosexuality in 1983.”<sup>5</sup> Such changes cede greater control to individuals over their own bodies.

#### Severing Society

A consequence, possibly unintended, of severing the link between sex and children is to diminish, if not remove completely, any social intentionality or transcendent meaning from sexual union. This both a consequence and a cause of the often-noted trend toward the privatization of sexual expression. Mellor and Shilling observe that in Anthony Giddens’s influential notion of “pure relationships,” that is, sexual relationships unencumbered by restrictive social norms,<sup>6</sup> “sexual relationships no longer involve the collective transformation of individual needs and desires into transpersonal social forms, with all the moral obligations this involves, but instead...rest merely on the reflexive construction of a mutually beneficial confluence of interests and needs.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Dominique Memmi, “The New State Administration of Bodies.” *Social Research* 70 (2003): 645-58.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling, “Confluent Love and the Cult of the Dyad: the Pre-contractual Foundations of Contractarian Sexual Relationships” in *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality, and Society*, ed. Jon Davies

Private and personal, sexual relations become contractual, ordered and understood in terms of reflexive (i.e., two-person mutual) agreements. They can (and must) become a personal contract, however, only in the absence of a social contract; they become de-socialized in the manner described only when they regularly fail to reproduce society. By removing the bodily intentionality of sexual relations, CAH precludes their social externality and makes such contractual sex relations possible (and necessary).

Sexual relations buttressed by CAH abstract not merely from any people in society but particularly from new people. In the alternative case, participants engage the probability of producing new human persons who are both uniquely reflective of their own characteristics and likely to survive well beyond the span of their own lives. Just as those new persons will receive from them a pre-existing social, linguistic and mental order that is experienced by them as transcendent and determined, so they will externalize that order, more or less shaped and altered by their own engagement with it, to a future that is otherwise beyond the reach of the participants in the sexual relationship.

Besides children, CAH diminishes the presence of another important social group: parents. As a class, parents are often more invested in social order and stability than are non-parents. Parents also advocate for a human alternative to overly rigid and demanding systems of work and governance. By reducing the number of parents and the size of families, abortion and homosexuality contribute to the development of a social order that is less hospitable for families, and thus for all persons.

### Unmaking Marriage

For a conceptive couple, sexual engagement is not only reflexive but also intentional. The reciprocity of their wills with respect to one another is conditioned by the congruence of their wills with respect to the potential third and new will of the child that may be created. This conditioning is reflected in the actual conditions under which they exercise their sexual freedom, conditions that are fulfilled, more or less,

---

and Gerard Loughlin (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 51-78 at p. 51.

by the institution of marriage. Severed from the natural prospect of children, sexual relations lose much of their social form. They are literally un-intentional. There may be mutual agreements of various sorts, but there is no marriage of wills. To put it another way, if marriage is an institution ordered to the production and nurture of children, both abortion and same-sex relations deny the goods of marriage.

For contractual sexual relations that retain unwelcome fertility, abortion assures freedom from childbirth. Abortion, then, substitutes for childbirth in structuring the kinds of contractual sexual relationships that are most fully exemplified by same-sex relations. This difference is almost fully expressed in the idea of same-sex “marriage.” As a structured relationship, same-sex “marriage” pursues a relational ideal that is in important respects the precise opposite of marriage as traditionally understood. At the heart of traditional conjugal marriage is an intentional sexual relationship conditioned by the prospect of childbirth; at the heart of same-sex “marriage” is a contractual sexual relationship conditioned by the absence of any prospect of childbirth. There is, then, the same affinity between same sex “marriage” and abortion that there is between conjugal marriage and childbirth.

#### Decoupling the Divine

By severing the link between sex and children, the CAH complex also severs the link between sex and God. The natural possibility of children imparts to sexual relations a kind of transcendence that has functioned as the material basis for manifold religious understandings that invest sexual relations with a sacramental or divine character. Sexual relations so conditioned are oriented not just to the present state of the participants but also and uniquely to the future state of society. They transcend, to a degree, the particular and the present in the interest of the common and the future, and are therefore always acts of hope and faith. This is clearly affirmed, by negation, by those who justify contraception-abortion by claiming that this is not an auspicious world in general, or an auspicious time in their own lives, into which to bring children. Conception, on the contrary, dares to hope that the world, if hostile to human flourishing, can be made better. The modern claim is that sex relations severed from children can better express love; but when they are not so severed, sex relations express not merely love but

also faith and hope. What is important here and now gives way to what is possible everywhere but not yet; and this mortal puts on immortality.

In its quest to rationalize sexual relations, moreover, CAH increases the realm of determination in sexual practice at the cost of reducing the realm of mystery. Those who produce a child influence and participate in the future, but they do not thereby attempt to control it. Their autonomy is constrained, not principally by coercive or punitive social circumstances, as CAH thinking envisions, but by accepting the prospect of a new and separate autonomy resulting from the exercise of their sexual freedom in union. This prospect imparts both meaning and mystery to that union. Since the prospective child exists only in a probable future, his or her interest is represented in the present by God. This is expressed in the sacredness attached to the conditions for the exercise of sexual freedom, and by the recognition that the child in prospect will be of the same nature as the uniting couple, and will, at least at maturity, attain rights and responsibilities that are equivalent to their own.

#### Rhetorical Alliances

The affinities in theory and practice among the issues comprising the CAH complex are reflected in rhetorical similarities among them in civic, political, and moral discourse. All three issues engage similar questions for jurisprudence, moral theory, and political debate.

In an article critiquing Rawlsian antiperfectionism, a view that would exclude fundamental moral convictions from public discourse, Robert George argues that disagreements about some issues embody different and irreconcilable “comprehensive views” of moral reality.<sup>8</sup> What is of interest here is that the two extant issues analyzed by George to advance this argument are legal abortion and homosexual “marriage.” It is not possible to address these issues in the civic arena pragmatically or by means of tolerance, since the disagreements at the political level “go all the way down” to incommensurable philosophical or religious convictions. Michael Sandel makes a similar point in an earlier article

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert George, “Public Reason and Political Conflict: Abortion and Homosexuality,” *Yale Law Journal* 106 (1997): 2475-2504.



on abortion and homosexuality.<sup>9</sup> These “morally charged issues” both raise the question “whether it is possible to identify rational standards or ideals of political discourse and action” to manage conflict over such fundamental matters.<sup>10</sup>

George points out that the rhetorical progression of public discourse over these issues follows a pattern seen in the dispute over slavery in the mid-nineteenth century:

By that point in time, some supporters of slavery were no longer content to defend the “peculiar institution” as a “necessary evil,” the toleration of which was required where abolition would allegedly produce disastrous, and therefore morally unacceptable, social and economic consequences. Instead, they contended that slavery was morally good and right, and that the position of their abolitionist opponents constituted, not a noble – albeit practically unattainable – moral ideal, but a form of moral and religious fanaticism that threatened the rights of slaveholders.<sup>11</sup>

As with slavery, George suggests, the supporters of abortion and homosexuality today have advanced from defending them as morally problematic practices that should be tolerated on grounds of pragmatism or civic order to asserting them as morally desirable ideals that are opposed only by intolerant moral or religious extremists. By this reframing the advocates of abortion and homosexuality need not confront their opponents’ arguments in civic discourse; those arguments are simply marginalized, ruled out of order as private, that is, not publically accessible, religious convictions or moral views.

George, writing in 1997, comments that such a progression is visible particularly in the abortion debate. In the subsequent decade it has also clearly occurred in the debate over same-sex “marriage.” Proponents of same-sex “marriage” today counter even majority opposition with the claim that opponents are engaging in religiously-based discrimination on the basis of narrow traditional or religious views that are both irrational and out of the mainstream.

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Sandel, “Moral Argument and Liberal Toleration: Abortion and Homosexuality,” *California Law Review* 77: 521-38.

<sup>10</sup> Robert George, “Public Reason and Political Conflict: Abortion and Homosexuality.” *Yale Law Journal* 106 (1997): 2475-2504, at 2475.

<sup>11</sup> George (1997): 2474-75.

In both abortion and homosexuality the rhetorical dispute is over the language of rights. Reproductive rights, meaning a right to abortion, and gay rights, asserted currently as a right to marry, are long-term fixtures of the political discourse on these controversial issues. Where access to contraception is controversial, it is defended as a reproductive right often linked to abortion. The original organization promoting legal abortion, the National Association for the Reform of Abortion Laws (NARAL), today keeps its acronym with the new name National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. Similarly, the largest organization working for the normalization of homosexuality calls itself simply the Human Rights Campaign. Abortion opponents long ago countered the claim to reproductive rights with the assertion of a right to life. Opponents of homosexual normalization have yet to formulate a clear accessible rights-based counter-argument to gay rights – a major rhetorical weakness.

The link between abortion (or reproductive) rights, homosexual (or gay) rights and rights to contraception is not merely theoretical or abstract. Gay rights organizations actively acknowledge and support abortion rights, and both pro-gay and pro-abortion groups make access to and education about contraception a central feature of their issues agenda. The Political Action Committee of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest gay rights advocacy group, lists “abortion rights” among the “issues of concern to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community” by which it assesses whether to endorse political candidates.<sup>12</sup> HRC also opposes sex education programs that do not teach about contraception. NARAL Pro-Choice America defines its mission not just as supporting abortion but as “preventing unintended pregnancy, bearing healthy children, and choosing legal abortion.” After abortion, the most important issues that NARAL reports that it advocates for are access to birth control and sex education that includes contraception instruction.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> “Political Action Committee Criteria” at [http://www.hrc.org/laws\\_and\\_elections/pac.asp](http://www.hrc.org/laws_and_elections/pac.asp) (Accessed May 26, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> “NARAL Pro-Choice America Mission Statement” at <http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/about-us/learn-about-us/mission.html> (Accessed May 27, 2010).

Gay rights organizations are also linked to abortion rights organizations by inheriting staff and sharing street-level activists. Much of the staff of gay rights groups cut their teeth working for abortion rights. For example, before becoming the current president of the Human Rights Campaign, Joe Solmonese served as executive officer of Emily's List, a prominent pro-choice political organization. His second at HRC, its managing director Suzanne Salkind, was a regional field manager for NARAL. Americans for Truth about Homosexuality, an organization dedicated to "countering the homosexual activist agenda," observes in a recent publication that "front-line, pro-life veterans...tell me that over the year homosexual activists have been in the forefront of defending abortion 'clinics'" from the witness of pro-life activists.<sup>14</sup>

Seldom mentioned by either side in the CAH controversies is the claimed constitutional right that underlies all three issues in law: the right to a sphere of privacy within which sexual behavior is not subject to fundamental, bodily, or natural moral constraints. This was affirmed for contraception in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, extended to abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, and more recently to sodomy in *Lawrence v. Texas*. This common basis, however, forms the justification for the interest of gay rights activists in supporting abortion rights. "The privacy rights decided in *Roe* were at the core of the landmark *Lawrence v. Texas* sodomy case," argues Joe Solmonese, the president of HRC. Pro-life rhetoricians, for reasons discussed above, have little trouble understanding this commonality. A plain-spoken publication from Americans for Truth about Homosexuality, an organization dedicated to "countering the homosexual activist agenda," puts the matter bluntly:

the issues of defending life and sexual morality are joined at the hip: each of the evil movements they oppose – the abortion and homosexuality lobbies – elevates mankind's selfish desires over God's will. Is it any wonder that the two greatest sin lobbies of today have as their sworn enemies the preservation of life

---

<sup>14</sup> "Abortion and homosexuality movements are linked in their war against life and marriage." Published online at Thursday, January 22nd, 2009 at <http://americansfortruth.com/> (Accessed May 27, 2010).

and natural marriage and the God-ordained family?<sup>15</sup>

Recently the Vatican, with similar perception but more moderate language, in defending the pope against media bias, has also linked the agencies supporting abortion and homosexuality. According to the Associated Press:

“The pope defends life and the family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, in a world in which powerful lobbies would like to impose a completely different” agenda, Spanish Cardinal Julian Herranz, head of the disciplinary commission for Holy See officials, said on the radio. Herranz didn’t identify the lobbies but “defense of life” is Vatican shorthand for anti-abortion efforts.<sup>16</sup>

Where the connection between gay rights and abortion rights is not so clear, however, is in the views of some advocates of gay rights advocates on the left. Writing in the *Independent Gay Forum*, pro-gay constitutional law professor Dale Carpenter argues that “abortion is not a gay issue in practice or in principle.” In practice, “gay couples are the least likely in the land to produce unwanted pregnancies.” In principle, he argues that *Lawrence* actually relies very little on *Roe*, both because “[e]ven for many liberal scholars, the reasoning of *Roe* is an embarrassment,” and because, more importantly,

As a matter of both the individual and societal interests at stake, *Roe* presents a much weaker case for privacy protection than does *Lawrence*.... The state’s interest in regulation is much stronger in the case of abortion than in the case of sodomy. Every abortion kills an unborn child who has no choice in the matter and who is, at the very least, a potential person. The stakes are high. By contrast, the state of Texas in *Lawrence* could not come up with a single reason for prohibiting homosexual sodomy except “morality.” Abortion is always killing; sex is often loving.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>“Abortion and homosexuality movements are linked in their war against life and marriage.” Published online at Thursday, January 22nd, 2009 at <http://americansfortruth.com/> (Accessed May 27, 2010).

<sup>16</sup>“Vatican sees Abortion, Gay Rights conspiracy,” Frances D’Emilio, *Associated Press*, April 7, 2010.

<sup>17</sup>“Abortion Rights are not Gay Rights.” Dale Carpenter, *Independent Gay Forum*, August 4, 2005.

Carpenter's argument makes clear that, for those unconcerned about or unable to recognize the common religious or natural moral principles contradicted by the claim of a right to abortion or homosexual practice, the connection between the two issues is not obvious. This suggests that the rhetorical and institutional link between gay rights and abortion rights may be more strategic than intrinsic. The connection between the issues is pursued almost exclusively by activists for gay rights, but not by abortion rights activists. Gay rights activism may wish to draw on the experience and resources of the older and larger abortion rights movement and to advance their cause by linking gay rights to the more mainstream and settled notion of abortion rights.

Whatever the reason, as a strategy to further gay rights, it has been successful: the rhetorical link between abortion and homosexuality appears to have benefitted gay rights, while possibly harming abortion rights. In popular opinion, persons who support abortion are also increasingly likely to support homosexuality. Overall, the correlation coefficient between these views is about .36 and growing stronger. Since the 1970s this correlation has increased by 38%. Over that period there has been a general rise in support for homosexuality and decline in support for abortion, but the driving force of this increased correlation between the issues has been a dramatic rise in support for homosexuality among those who support abortion. In the 1970s less than a fifth (19.9%) of those who supported abortion also supported homosexuality; by the 2000s that proportion had more than doubled to over half (50.9%). At the same time, support for abortion *dropped*, though not as strongly, among supporters of homosexuality, from 77.1% in the 1970s to 65.2% in the 2000s. In popular thought, support for abortion has become strongly associated with support for homosexuality.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> This analysis draws on publicly available data from the General Social Survey, an omnibus survey of the U.S. population administered in most years since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center with funding from the National Science Foundation. The correlation between views on abortion and homosexuality rose from .26 to .36. Abortion was measured by approval of the right to a legal abortion if the woman was poor and could not afford to have a child; homosexuality was measured by a question asking whether sexual relations between two adults of the same sex was always wrong, almost always

### Empirical Similarities

Beside the cultural and rhetorical commonalities, abortion and homosexuality share numerous empirical similarities as socialized behaviors that may be considered significant from a pro-life perspective. I will mention only a few of the more apparent of these. Both abortion and homosexual practice exemplify actions that were criminal, deviant, and stigmatized a generation ago. Today abortion enjoys – and same-sex relationships are on the way to enjoying – legality and formal legitimacy in American life. But both are also still quietly stigmatized, sources of shame to those who participate in them. Both are the subject of significant moral and religious condemnation resulting in political and social controversy.

Both abortion and homosexuality also often leave participants emotionally scarred, candidates for therapeutic interventions that are themselves the subject of professional stigma outside of concerted religious settings. Like abortion, homosexuality is associated with increased problems of mental health and distress. Though rarely acknowledged in popular media or discourse, emerging epidemiological evidence in the past decade has clearly established a link between homosexuality and mental illness or emotional problems.<sup>19</sup> In 1999, Fergusson published a large-sample analysis demonstrating that, compared to heterosexuals, 21-year-old homosexuals were at four times the risk of major depression and six times the risk of suicide.<sup>20</sup> A simultaneous matched twin study by Herrell (1999) showed that the lifetime probability of engaging in suicide-related behavior was five times higher among homosexuals than heterosexuals.<sup>21</sup> Bailey, a prominent pro-gay researcher on sexual orientation, acknowledged: “These studies contain arguably the best published data on the

---

wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary see D.M. Fergusson et al., “Sexual Orientation and Mental Health in a Birth Cohort of Young Adults,” *Psychological Medicine* 35 (2004): 971-81.

<sup>20</sup> D.M. Fergusson et al., “Is sexual orientation related to mental health problems and suicidality in young people?” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 56 (1999): 876-80.

<sup>21</sup> R. Herrell et al., “Sexual Orientation and Suicidality: A Co-Twin Control Study in Adult Men,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 56 (1999): 867-74.

association between homosexuality and psychopathology, and both converge on the same unhappy conclusion: homosexual people are at a substantially higher risk for some forms of emotional problems, including suicidality, major depression, and anxiety disorder.”<sup>22</sup>

#### Lessons Learned

Recognizing the affinities between homosexuality and abortion provides not only a better understanding of these related issues and discourses in themselves but also has broad implications for engagement with them by proponents of human life. First, the many implicit associations between abortion and homosexuality (and contraception) underscore the point that the “life issues” do not stand on their own but are intertwined with a wide range of other issues. Opponents on moral issues involving the sanctity of human life do not merely disagree on moral principles or political reasoning but are implicated in opposing and largely incommensurable communicative frames or cultures. This stark disjunction has often been noted at the level of discourse; even at rarified levels of moral reasoning, opponents on life issues often talk past each other. This is not merely a difference of language or interests, this study suggests; the incompatibility between opponents on life issues is symptomatic of a fundamental cultural cleavage. This cultural cleavage is reinforced by America’s two-party political process, as the two dominant political parties today grow increasingly more polarized from each other. Political forces, in turn, impel the dyadic and distinct cultures to become increasingly disjunctive. In the absence of substantial compromise, politicized moral controversy results in a winner and a loser, which reinforces the cultural polarization further.

This study further suggests that at the cultural roots of moral controversy over life there is buried not an idea but a body. The opposing cultures of life and death interact at a deep level with the structures of the human body, particularly the bodily implications of human sexuality. Their most controversial points of opposition problematize sexual choices and experience. This may have something to do with the fact that for most conflicted socio-moral issues involving

---

<sup>22</sup> J.M. Bailey, “Homosexuality and Mental Illness,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 56 (1999): 883-84 at p. 883.

the body today, there is not a range of competing views, but only two. Like sex itself, today's cultural discourse about sex is strongly dyadic (or bipolar).

Less often noted than the cleavage is the corresponding internal coherence of each of the opposing cultures. For the CAH issues, as we have seen, the opponents on each issue share many elements in common with their counterparts on the other issues. All three issues implicate much the same underlying (and opposing) cultural ideals, commitments, and sensitivities. Disagreement on each issue is polarized and intractable just because, in part, agreement across issues is so strong and fundamental for each of the opposing sides. Discourse polarization, for example, is intractable, in part, because each side is speaking, not to engage the other side, but to engage, confirm views and stimulate resources from its own side.

This centripetal effect of each opposing culture, reflected in the strength and breadth of the cultural affinities across issues, are, as we have seen, not always readily apparent. Yet recognizing this coherence is crucial for the success of pro-life efforts. An image may help here. The opposing cultures – of life and death, if you like – are like two trees that send out underground runners resulting in distant but contiguous saplings that represent the particular controverted issues. The connection between the saplings, and their common connection to the tree, may not be visible without some digging. But it is not possible to make sense of the “opposing” saplings without unearthing these connections. More importantly, uprooting the saplings will have no effect on the trees.

If it is to be successful, moral discourse on the life issues must become cultural discourse. Following the image, it must address the trees, not just the saplings. The opponents of life may understand this better than its proponents, at least as regards homosexuality. Just as those interested in normalizing homosexuality have recognized that supporting abortion furthers their goal, so those interested in ending abortion should recognize that opposing homosexuality is important, perhaps essential, to achieving that goal. Those of a life perspective should not falsely conceive of themselves as facing a Hobson's choice of confronting either abortion or homosexuality (or any other related issue) due to limited resources or the varying temporary political salience of respective issues. Cultural resources are not a fixed sum.



Greater success on any life issue enhances the possibility of success on all others.

The need to connect morality with culture in pro-life discourse is transgressed or not fully achieved in pro-life treatment of both abortion and homosexuality, but in contrasting ways.

With abortion the danger for pro-life opposition is to lose the forest out of concern for the trees. The clearest example of this is the practice of murdering abortionists. Those who take such actions justify them with an ethic of the defense of life. The reasoning is, if I kill this man who is killing babies, fewer babies will be killed. Besides the often-noted morally repellant distortion of the premise, this logic also fails (as consequentialist moral arguments often do) because the results do not follow from the premise. Some few abortions may be prevented by disrupting the abortionist's schedule and by discouraging other doctors from entering abortion practice. But in the context of the ongoing controversy over abortion in America, the moral aversion to such sensational killings is a significant factor in perpetuating the moral regime or culture that sustains abortion as a continuing social practice. Pro-abortion interest groups trumpet such killings as evidence of the moral perversion and terrorism of anti-abortion thinking. At over a million abortions a year, extending the practice by only a few hours results in the death of far more babies than could possibly have been saved by the direct consequence of a single abortionist's death. The net result, then, of killing an abortionist is not to save babies but to kill far more babies than otherwise.

This fallacy is easily seen with regard to abortionist murders. It is perhaps less easy to see the similar, albeit weaker, danger involved in less extreme efforts to prevent particular abortions. Picketing an abortion clinic may prevent some particular women from contracting an abortion. It may also reinforce a cultural perception of abortion opponents as harassing and restricting women, which confirms a much larger number of women in the correctness of their decision to abort a child.

With homosexuality, by contrast, the danger is to lose the trees while trying to save the forest. Zeal for opposing the cultural incursion of normative homosexuality rarely co-exists with efforts to provide support for homosexual individuals to live in moral purity. For their part, homosexual individuals often make cultural acceptance a condition

of discourse at all. Hating the sin while loving the sinner is challenging with regard to both abortion and homosexuality, but in the absence of a victim, even a small and largely invisible victim, it is much easier to confuse hating the sin with hating the sinner.

In part, this is because even the sinners hate the sin. Abortion, like gay sex, is often practiced by those who oppose it as a rule. This, incidentally, is why shaming can have some effect in reducing abortion incidence. But this also implies that intellectual arguments and legal debates may not amend the cultural problem, even – perhaps especially – if they are successful. One observer has noted that both the anti-abortion and gay rights movements have been relatively successful in the past decade by adopting a similar strategy that acknowledges this point: “Both have taken sometimes abstract, theoretical arguments and humanized them.”<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, if pro-life treatment of abortion focuses too strongly on the moral evaluation of personal choices, on the homosexuality issue it almost excludes such considerations altogether. Those on the left wing oppose its social legitimation, as in gay marriage, because this implies that homosexuality is not otherwise legitimate in itself. They also oppose the construction of same-sex attraction as an innate condition, since this relieves homosexual persons of moral agency. Gay rights supporters should learn to love the sin, they argue.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, those opposed to homosexuality have made the fallacy of homosexual institutions much more clear than they have the fallacy of homosexuality itself. In a contradiction between the moral and the cultural, they wish to argue that same-sex marriage is a cultural problem, same-sex relations are a moral problem, but same-sex attraction is neither a moral nor a cultural problem. They, too, want to relieve homosexual persons of moral agency, and so avoid hating the sinner. The result is that neither side is fully coherent on this issue.

---

<sup>23</sup> Michael Gerson, “Gay Rights, Anti-Abortion: Parallel Strategies,” *Washington Post* (12 March 2010), p. A13.

<sup>24</sup> “Love the sin” is the title of a thoughtful volume that sets forth the argument summarized here. See Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2004).