

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Making sense of conservative Christian opposition to same-sex love is a project that has more than just academic ramifications. As a scholar of religion, I am interested in examining how religious, national, and sexual concerns intertwine in conservative Christian discourses about homosexuality. Analyzing these interrelations correctly, I believe, will help us to understand better how religious practices shape, and are shaped by, even secular politics, in the US and beyond. Yet, many times when I report on my work in academic settings or in private, people share with me their personal experiences: there is the story of the young gay man growing up in a conservative Christian household, or that of the evangelical minister who talks about how he loves his lesbian daughter but cannot endorse her “life-style.” Stories like these give a glimpse into the conflict-laden biographies that are entangled in how conservative Christians talk about same-sex love – in the streams of words, narrative, and images that circulate among them and that they use to converse with a wider public.

A closer look at these stories shows furthermore how words can fail. For example, the Christian minister who feels compelled to tell “God’s truth” to his beloved daughter knows that doing so will alienate her profoundly. Yet, despite an awareness that his words of biblical truth and compassion cannot reach her, he cannot name the love that his child and her life-partner share. Words fail him. Consequently, silences and superficial chatter mark his family’s gatherings that only now and then are interspersed by outbursts of potentially meaningful conversations that lead nowhere. The languages of biblical truth and love that are supposed to be life-giving threaten to undermine his family. At the same time, the languages circulating

among many political analysts fail, as well. It is not sufficient to explain conservative Christian resistance to same-sex love simply as the result of bigotry or a politically motivated ploy to galvanize Republican core voters. These kinds of “explanations” do not account for the complexities of convictions that hinder men like the minister from acknowledging that gay and lesbian Americans are bound to each other by love.

Perhaps it is for biographical reasons that I want to give more attention to the theological plight expressed by conservative Christian language about same-sex love – and perhaps it is for biographical reasons that I want to probe more deeply into the webs of meanings it spins. Thus, I must admit that as a gay man and as someone who, before turning to the more sanguine profession of religious studies, spent a decade engaged in Christian ministry, I am reticent to take the diagnosis of bigotry or political motives as the full story. Obviously, I do not consider it to be theologically problematic that I love another man (particular the one to whom I dedicate this book). On the contrary, as I have argued in another context, such love is religiously productive; and others, like the orthodox rabbi Steven Greenberg or the Christian theologians Eugene Rogers and Mark Jordan, have given profound and nuanced accounts of the religious fruits of same-sex love.¹ Yet, I have spent too many years in a Christian world that is not welcoming and affirming to homosexuals to know that religious arguments and narratives are not to be easily discounted. Thus, while this book is not a piece of theology, I want to treat carefully the conservative Christian language under review by neither claiming to understand it too quickly, nor declaring it to be incomprehensible.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was particularly concerned about conversations that bring our words to the point of failure – as in the case of the minister when they seem to produce clarity but create confusion, or as in the case of much political commentary when our

explanations obscure that we do not understand, in fact, what is going on. In these cases, the incessant repetition of cherished positions (“the bible tells me that homosexuality is a sin” or “they reject same-sex love because they are biblical fundamentalist bigots”) obscures more than it enlightens. For Wittgenstein, these are situations where we have replaced a quest for mutual intelligibility with sloganeering. At this point, it is important to stop the flow of words and to reflect on what it is that we are in fact saying or that we want to say – to examine the reach and underground of our words, narratives, and images. In short, instead of slogans we need new attempts at understanding both our own words and those of our opponents.

Not everyone may think that understanding, making myself understood, or being understandable is a value in a democratic society. It certainly is not an absolute value. Yet, the perils of abdicating public intelligibility are clear, particularly now that there seems to be some movement in the political debates about same-sex marriage. Refusing to understand a person’s words (even if they seem difficult to comprehend) implies not only a refusal to be in communication but also to be in a shared political space with her. Here, I concur with Wittgenstein’s conviction that at a point when sloganeering is rampant we need to take special care for the contours of our language. Thus, while this book is mainly an academic text, I hope that its labor of understanding may also engage those of us who, as listeners or speakers, wrestle with conservative Christian language about same-sex love.

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¹ Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men*; Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions*; Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*; Ludger Viefhues, “‘On My Bed at Night I Sought Him Whom My Heart Loves:’ Reflections on Trust, Horror, G*D, and the Queer Body in Vowed Religious Life,” *Modern Theology* 17, no. 4 (2001): 413-425.