

Getting What “We” Deserve: Terrorism, Tolerance, Sexuality, and the Christian Right*

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Abstract *On September 13, 2001, Jerry Falwell made a guest appearance on Pat Robertson’s 700 Club by remote satellite and commented on the bombings two days before of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Together, the two ministers forcefully expressed a “politics of desert” that links American tolerance of lesbians and gay men, feminists, atheists, and others with God’s punishment on the polity. Although Falwell and Robertson were widely denounced for their comments, little analysis followed in the media of the theological and political content of the Christian Right’s politics of desert or of the multiple modes of address that Christian Right leaders use to deliver political messages to followers and to the general American public. This essay explores the theological and political commitments that ground a politics of desert and, more specifically, links the Falwell–Robertson comments to recent Christian Right political activism against lesbians and gay men.*

Setting the Straight Story

When the World Trade Center and the Pentagon became terrorist targets on September 11, 2001, one form of public response was a conservative Christian “politics of desert” that sought to contextualize the attacks in terms of God’s will and plan for America. A politics of desert is grounded in what one anthropologist labels a “theology of blame,” the belief that:

God may allow bad things to happen without necessarily causing them, and when he allows bad things to happen, it is for reasons that are transcendent and often punitive, though ultimately redemptive (however unfathomable that seems to those who suffer immediate consequences).¹

Moving beyond this formulation, a politics of desert fuses theological with political criteria and agendas. It is characterized by the general conviction that God punishes nations that refuse His criteria for righteousness, and the more specific conviction that tolerance and forbearance of particular kinds of sins—

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¹ Omri Elisha, “A Theology of Blame,” *Anthropology News, The Official Newspaper of the American Anthropological Association*, March, 2002; available online at: <<http://www.aaanet.org/press/an/0203ElishaBlame.htm>> (March 2, 2002).

and groups of sinners—are responsible for God’s decision to bring scourges such as terrorism upon the US. Although many opinion leaders and secular Americans condemned the most notorious expression of a politics of desert in the days after September 11, few seemed to grasp the theological roots and political implications of such a conviction.

On September 13, 2001 Jerry Falwell made a guest appearance on Pat Robertson’s *700 Club* by remote satellite and commented on the bombings of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Falwell noted that “God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.” In response, Robertson explicitly agreed: “Jerry, that’s my feeling. I think we’ve just seen the antechamber to horror. We haven’t even begun to see what they can do to the major population.” Falwell continued:

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.”²

Falwell’s comments blaming perverts and liberal elites for the suicide attacks were quickly assailed from different positions on the ideological spectrum. Predictably, liberal groups denounced the hatefulness of the claims, but President Bush also used proxies to distance himself from the comments. Responding to the identification of homosexuality with terrorism, Human Rights Campaign Executive Director Elizabeth Birch immediately spoke out against the comments. In a speech delivered on October 6, she compared the pair’s political ideology to that of the terrorists. Falwell and Robertson, she said, “chose to blame blindly, motivated by prejudice and fueled by the very brand of zealotry and hatred that has put America in danger.” The ministers’ comments were “a difficult reminder of the challenges we still face within our own borders. Our [lesbian and gay] community knows all too well the devastating effects of hate.”³

Responding to the avalanche of publicity, Falwell apologized on September 18 for his comments, calling them “insensitive, uncalled for at the time and unnecessary.”⁴ Cartoonists and comics picked up the controversy and made it yet another chapter in the long-running mainstream joke on the man who only a few years ago warned American parents about the dangers posed to their children by androgynous teletubbies.⁵ For his part, Pat Robertson remained defiant, and his subsequent statements help to clarify what is at stake in the original comments and in the controversy that followed.

By early October, journalists, newspaper editors, talking heads, and public intellectuals had weighed in on the Falwell–Robertson remarks, calling them

² John F. Harris, “God Gave U.S. ‘What We Deserve,’ Falwell Says,” *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2001, p. C3.

³ Elizabeth Birch, “Speech by Elizabeth Birch at HRC’s Fifth Annual National Dinner,” *Human Rights Campaign*, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.hrc.org/newsreleases/2001/011008ebspeech.asp>> (October 10, 2001).

⁴ Jerry Falwell, “Jerry Falwell Apologizes,” *Cross + Word*, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.banner.org.uk/wtc/patrob.html>> (May 20, 2002).

⁵ The satirical magazine *The Onion* featured the following ersatz “headline” in response to the controversy: “Jerry Falwell: Is That Guy a Dick or What?”

"despicable," "obscene," "divisive," and "hateful."⁶ On October 9, Robertson responded in a press release. In it, he answered his own hypothetical question about public tragedy—"why does this happen?"—by referring to the sinfulness of American society and repeating claims familiar from the original *700 Club* interview: that "it is happening because God Almighty is lifting his protection from us" and that "this is only a foretaste, a little warning, of what is going to happen."⁷ In his press release, Robertson did delete the list of domestic groups responsible for the terror attack, although sexuality and self-indulgence continued to figure as causes of terrorism. However, even more revealing, both as doctrine and defense, is Robertson's open letter to US newspaper editors.

Responding to the criticisms of himself and Falwell, in the open letter Robertson deplors the "misinformation, misstatements of fact, snippets of conversation wrenched out of context, and vicious criticism of sentiments attributed to me which I never articulated."⁸ Robertson points out in the letter that he had "never expressed the statements that are attributed to Dr. Falwell." However, Robertson ends the letter by quoting Abraham Lincoln. Referring to the Civil War and the struggle over slavery that precipitated it, Lincoln's words in essence recapitulate the theme of cultural sinfulness followed by the visitation of divine wrath. The apology ends with these reflections:

Why has a statement that was so universally acclaimed in 1863 become the object of scorn and ridicule when made in a slightly different form in the year 2001? I do not know what others will do, but I choose to follow the advice of Abraham Lincoln.

In the open letter, Robertson turns the accusation of intolerance back on the (liberal) media, reiterates the content of his and Falwell's original statement, and seizes the moral high ground from his secular adversaries.

Although the public controversy over the Falwell–Robertson interview had died away by the end of October, a postscript appeared in the mainstream press. An October 4 fundraising letter for Jerry Falwell ministries had accused "liberals of all stripes" of "seiz[ing] this opportunity to trash Dad's deeply held Christian beliefs and to literally attack him day and night."⁹ The letter was signed by Falwell's son Jonathan. In a November 18 interview, a *Washington*

⁶ Many conservatives, including William F. Buckley and Rush Limbaugh, joined this chorus of disapprobation. See William F. Buckley, "Invoking God's Thunder on the Reverend Jerry Falwell," *National Review Online*, September 18, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.nationalreview.com/buckley/buckley091801.shtml>> (March 4, 2002); *People for the American Way*, "Media Reactions to Jerry Falwell–Pat Robertson Comments on the September 11 Tragedies," 2001; available online at: <<http://www.pfaw.org/911/mediareacts.shtml>> (October 18, 2001).

⁷ Pat Robertson, "Robertson's Statement Regarding Terrorist Attack on America," *The Official Site of Pat Robertson*, October 9, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.patrobertson.com/pressreleases/TerroristAttack.asp>> (October 10, 2001).

⁸ Pat Robertson, "Pat Robertson's Letter to U.S. Newspaper Editors," *The Official Site of Pat Robertson*, September 21, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.patrobertson.com/pressreleases/newspapereditors.asp>> (May 18, 2002).

⁹ Americans United for Separation of Church and State, "Jerry Falwell Tries to Cash In on Controversy: TV Preacher's Ministry Sends Out Fund-Raising Appeal Exploiting His Controversial Tirade over Terrorist Attacks," October 22, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.au.org/press/pr102201.htm>> (October 25, 2001); Lloyd Grove, "The Reliable Source," *The Washington Post*, October 24, 2001, p. C3.

Post reporter attempted to induce Falwell to reconcile his earlier apology with the text of the fundraising letter. Falwell successfully frustrated the reporter's attempts to clarify his position by invoking Jonathan's right to react to attacks on his father and by coyly pointing out that he received many more complaints from Christian followers about his "apology" than he received complaints from critics about his original statement.¹⁰

Transcripts of televised *700 Club* conversations are posted to the Christian Broadcasting Network web site as a matter of course. However, if Falwell's controversial comments about the cause of the terrorist attacks were ever posted in their entirety, they had been edited by October 9 to remove the controversial statements and reflect merely the "brokenness [and] tears" appropriate in the aftermath of tragedy. In the abbreviated comments, Falwell notes that the "most optimistic thing" he can find in the devastation is that "only God could bring it upon us."¹¹ This is one central element of the message that Falwell and Robertson broadcast to their followers on September 13, and one that is consistent with a theology of blame. However, in order to decipher the complete meaning of the message, we must consider the intersection of theology and politics with regard to tolerance and particular categories of sins and sinners.

In their public statements, Falwell, Robertson, and other Christian Right actors complain that secular responses to incidents such as the *700 Club* interview are a sign of pervasive anti-Christian sentiment and intolerance to counter-hegemonic speech. These charges confuse religious prejudice with vigorous political disagreement over the terms of citizenship. In addition, they often successfully derail substantive responses to aspects of the Christian Right political agenda. In fact, Falwell and Robertson's statements were neither misspoken (as Falwell later claimed) nor merely signs of capricious personal malice against disfavored groups (as many critics assumed), but long-standing and frequently articulated political claims with theological justification. In the remainder of this essay, I examine the current theological and political context of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson's high-profile expression of a politics of desert, especially as it is wielded against lesbian and gay people and identity.

The fact that Falwell's and Robertson's claims about the linkage between terrorism and tolerance of sinfulness are intended for an audience of born-again, Bible-believing Christians and not for others does not diminish their political significance.¹² Christian Right leaders actively strive to have their political beliefs misidentified by the broad public. Unfortunately, mainstream media and political commentators often collude in this strategy by delivering news reports of new Christian Right religious issues that are "superficial and lacking [in]

¹⁰ Peter Carlson, "Jerry Falwell's Awkward Apology: What Did He Mean and When Did He Mean It? Huh?" *Washington Post*, November 18, 2001, p. F5.

¹¹ Jerry Falwell, "Jerry Falwell Apologizes," *Cross + Word*, September 18, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.banner.org.uk/wtc/patrob.html>> (May 18, 2002).

¹² Here I use terminology that is frequently used by Protestant conservative Christians. Harding emphasizes the "connecting tissues" that bring together those who are variously described as "fundamentalist," "evangelical," and "Pentecostal." See Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 19.

context."¹³ Commentators both fail to trace the precedents of controversial comments and overlook the multiple modes of address favored by Christian Right leaders.¹⁴

To Err is Human, but Tolerance is for Liberals

The "New" Christian Right is a social movement that exists in a mutually influencing relation with contemporary liberal and democratic norms and discourse at the same time that it fantasizes an innocent exegesis of scriptural meaning.¹⁵ The optimistic reading of such influence is that far from being a monolithic threat to liberal and democratic values, the Christian Right is domesticated by the give and take of democratic politics and thereby passes into the mainstream of American political discourse and participation. One version of this argument is Nancy Rosenblum's claim that social groups with illiberal aims and doctrines do not necessarily constitute a threat to pluralism and democracy. Rosenblum argues that even such groups may stimulate the development of moral dispositions that—if not constructive to, at minimum—are not destructive to the wider democratic society. This is so because even illiberal groups encourage the cultivation of cooperation, rule-following, and norms that proscribe force.¹⁶

As Kathleen Sullivan points out, however, there is a problem with Rosenblum's sanguine assessment of even exclusionary hate groups: it relies upon the existence of a democratic polity whose ideology and institutions are able and willing to protect the rights of those disfavored by exclusionary groups.¹⁷ Rosenblum's optimism about the ability of a rights regime to empower individuals in the face of organized group disfavor is in many important respects demonstrably false in the case of lesbians and gay men, and indeed, Rosenblum does not take up this particular variety of exclusion in *Membership and Morals*. Rosenblum's only reference to same-sex sexuality is one in which she notes that most violence motivated by anti-homosexual bias is carried out by "unaffiliated individuals" rather than by members of groups.¹⁸ This fact—which relies upon a narrow construal of "membership"—does not address the broader issue that touches the daily lives of lesbians and gay men. Together with overt forms of

¹³ Jeffery K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, "Televangelism: The Story the Media Missed," *Boston Review*, April, 1988; available online at: <<http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR13.2/hadden.html>> (February 1, 2002).

¹⁴ This was true not only of the mainstream press, but also of the lesbian and gay press. See e.g. "News of the Year: Far Right," *The Advocate*, January 22, 2002, p. 25. This news bulletin asks rhetorically if "2001 mark[ed] a sea change in the right wing's willingness to demonize gay people" and concludes: "maybe so, if conservative pundits' and politicians' responses to Jerry Falwell's finger-pointing are any indication."

¹⁵ Susan Friend Harding, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 3–46. For a similar argument and debate, see Will Kymlicka, "Liberal Complacencies," in Susan Moller Okin, Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard and Martha C. Nussbaum (eds), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 31–34.

¹⁷ Kathleen M. Sullivan, "Defining Democracy Down," *The American Prospect* 9:41 (1998); available online at: <<http://www.prospect.org/print/V9/41/sullivan-k.html>> (February 2, 2002).

¹⁸ Rosenblum, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

political action, such as lobbying, the kinds of bias fomented by organized groups influences the distribution of rights and public goods such as marriage.¹⁹

It is worth noting that the legally and politically marginal status of lesbians and gay men is continually discursively reversed by members of the Christian Right (and the broader New Right movement) through empirically questionable claims of disproportionate lesbian and gay wealth and political power.²⁰ As Didi Herman points out in her study of Christian Right antipathy and political action toward lesbians and gay men, representations of homosexuals as “sexually depraved, superrich, and intent on domination” rely upon and bolster “preexisting anti-Semitic ideologies.”²¹

The contending perspective on the relation of the Christian Right to democratic norms and processes is that far from being either domesticated by or for democratic society, the Right actively and continually constructs anti-democratic citizens and values through “bigoted discourse.”²² Writing of Dick Armey’s apology for his 1995 reference to Representative Barney Franks as “Barney Fag,” Anna Marie Smith points out that those on the Christian Right seek to redefine the liberal democratic tradition to “center” their own anti-democratic and exclusionary politics. Smith frames her work on the New Right in terms of the Right’s attempt to construct and occupy an imaginary tolerant political center. As she points out when writing of the rise of the British New Right, the triumph of right-wing ideology with regard to race and sexuality is such that “the majority of the intolerant misidentify as tolerant.”²³ At the same time, the “New Right has radically redefined such important signifiers as ‘equality’ and ‘tolerance.’”²⁴ For Smith, the construction of an imaginary figure of the celibate, non-politically active “good homosexual” supports fictive right-wing tolerance for a kind of citizen who cannot exist as simultaneously “good” and “homosexual.”

Smith’s arguments about the New Right’s attempts to recode intolerance as tolerance are trenchant. However, in analyzing Armey’s apology, Smith argues that the Christian Right “contradicts itself” in the course of “shifting from position to position on a highly unstable political terrain.” In this vein, she notes the maneuvering to proscribe homosexuality and homosexuals in some messages and to put forth the claim in other messages to “hate the sin but love the

¹⁹ R. Claire Snyder, “Neopatriarchy and the Antihomosexual Agenda,” in Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson (eds), *Fundamental Differences: Feminists Talk Back to Social Conservatives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 157–171.

²⁰ See Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *Perfect Enemies: The Religious Right, the Gay Movement, and the Politics of the 1990s* (New York: Crown, 1996); M. V. Lee Badgett, *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

²¹ Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press Herman, 1997), pp. 127, 125.

²² Anna Marie Smith, “Why Did Armey Apologize?” in Amy E. Ansell (ed.), *Unraveling the Right: The New Conservatism in American Thought and Politics* (New York: Westview Press, 1998), p. 167.

²³ Anna Marie Smith, “The Centering of Right-Wing Extremism through the Construction of an ‘Inclusionary’ Racism and Homophobia,” in Shane Phelan (ed.), *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 114.

²⁴ Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 68.

sinner."²⁵ Certainly, there is instability in the construction of ideology and the calling forth of political subjects. But there is another explanation for these contradictions. Christian Right leaders deliberately cultivate distinct ideological perspectives for their different audiences—born-again followers and others (including those who are unaligned but are prospective born-again conservatives). In addition, not all leaders on the Right—and especially on the Christian Right—attempt to situate themselves and their followers as tolerant. Instead, and especially on themes related to gender, sexuality, reproductive rights and family organization, they cultivate a virtue of intolerance that can itself be located in various forms among the multiple political traditions in American history.²⁶

What accounts for the Christian Right's embrace of an intolerant politics of desert? Students of the Christian Right agree that the answer lies in contemporary end-times apocalyptic theology and, more specifically, in the tension between premillennialism and postmillennialism. The majority of Christian Right leaders such as Falwell, Robertson, James Dobson, and Tim LaHaye are dispensational premillennialists who expect born-again Christians to be removed from earth—"raptured"—before the inception of the "tribulation" marked by the reign of the Antichrist and well before the triumphal return of Jesus that will follow.²⁷ Postmillennial teachings provide a counterpoint to this end-time narrative. For postmillennialists, the reign of Jesus and the vanquishing of evil will occur only when Christians have lived through the tribulation and reclaimed the earth for Christianity. As Herman points out, between these two perspectives, it is the minority postmillennialism that appears to provide more support for coercive efforts to remake societies and governments in the image of conservative Christianity.²⁸ Historically and theoretically, the majority premillennial perspective underwrites a more apolitical and isolationist theology and a Christian church that is content to save individual souls and wait for the imminent rapture of believers.

Contradictory political commitments arise from the two ways of interpreting scriptural prophecies concerning the end of the world. Herman suggests that one central feature of the Christian Right is that it has crafted from these two opposing interpretations a "cloudy synthesis"—a *de facto* consensus that born-again Christians are responsible for preparing a Christian nation and world before Jesus returns.²⁹ In her more ethnographic account of the evolution of the contemporary Christian Right, Susan Friend Harding locates the theological and political foundations of this synthesis in Bible preaching and prophecy of the 1970s and 1980s. Harding finds in these sources and in their subsequent effects the development of a new "mode of millennial dreaming" in which Christian

²⁵ Anna Marie Smith, "Why Did Armeiy Apologize?" *op. cit.*, p. 163. Many others note this same strategy. See e.g. Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

²⁶ Rogers Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *American Political Science Review* 87:3 (1993), pp. 549–565; Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions that Matter in Right-Wing America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

²⁷ For a popular rendering of these theological arguments, see the "Left Behind" series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The books have been staples on the New York Times Best Sellers List since they debuted in 1995.

²⁸ Didi Herman, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

²⁹ Didi Herman, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

political action is given greater scope even as dispensational premillennialism is, at least theoretically, retained intact. No longer confronting a hopelessly regressive world, Christian Right preaching and prophesy opens up opportunity for Christians to influence the end time by averting a “pre-tribulation tribulation”³⁰—what Harding calls a “little tribulation.”³¹

The significance of this new reading of revelation is that positing a little tribulation remedies the puzzling absence of the US from end-time revelation and places it at the center of end-time prophesy. Pat Robertson’s prophetic writing reflects this re-centering of the US in Christian Right eschatology.

[A] world government can come together only after the Christian United States is out of the way. With America still free and at large, Satan’s schemes will at best be only partially successful ... And if America goes down, all hope is lost to the rest of the world.³²

Pragmatically, the little tribulation encourages conservative Christians to become the agents of “political and social change” and reverse God’s ultimate judgment on the American nation, if not the judgment bound to be rendered on the larger world.

Most Americans will not be surprised to learn that opinion leaders of the Christian Right often fulminate against religious and other forms of tolerance as ideals to be upheld in American society. For many, tolerance—and especially tolerance mandated by US law or the constitution—is itself an abuse of political authority and an invitation to Christian resistance.³³ It is true that some Christian Right thinkers do make a distinction that permits conservative Christians to claim tolerance as their own. These thinkers defend opposition to rights claims of disfavored minorities such as lesbians and gay men by contrasting “traditional tolerance” (in which respect for others coexists with an underlying conviction that some beliefs and practices are simply wrong or sinful) with a “new tolerance” that tries to obliterate the value distinctions between alternative beliefs, practices, and social arrangements.³⁴ Using this rhetorical distinction, it is only the “new tolerance” that is dangerous to Christian faith not tolerance properly understood. However, whether Christian Right leaders deploy opposition to “new tolerance” or a divinely mandated intolerance, the result looks much like what those outside the Christian Right moral community would call old intolerance.

[Y]ou’re supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don’t have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist. I can love the people who hold false opinions, but I don’t have to be nice to them.³⁵

³⁰ Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1980).

³¹ Susan Friend Harding, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

³² Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing, 1991), p. 256.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 249–268.

³⁴ Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance: How a Cultural Movement Threatens to Destroy You, Your Faith, and Your Children* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998).

³⁵ Robertson made these comments on the 14 January 1991 broadcast of the *700 Club*. Robertson, quoted in David Cantor, *The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance and Pluralism in America* (New York: Anti-Defamation League Cantor, 1994), p. 26.

For Robertson, tolerating "people who hold false opinions" and loving them are discrete forms of response. The loving to which Robertson alludes consists entirely of offering loving reproof, as in demands that lesbians and gay men renounce their sexual identity and embrace celibacy. Falwell's recent comments to a *Washington Post* reporter support this interpretation. Replying to the accusation that he did not listen to 200 lesbians and gay men he invited with ex-ghostwriter Mel White for a dialogue at Liberty University in 1999, he noted, "I didn't invite them in to *listen* to them. I invited them in to *talk* to them."³⁶ Thus the "folly of excessive tolerance" that Smith identifies in Right ideology easily becomes the folly of even minimal tolerance extended to those who exemplify minority sexuality.³⁷ In fact, Christian Right leaders routinely instruct their followers that it is they—born-again, Bible-believing Christians—who are denied tolerance by a society whose descent into cultural evil is increasingly apparent and aggressive.³⁸

Know Your Audience

When the GOP lost the presidential election of 1996, Republican Party strategists began to worry about the ways in which Party activists projected hatred and intolerance for minority groups. Fearing that obvious appeals to cultural boundaries and exclusions would hurt the Republican Party with swing voters, and particularly with women, strategists prevailed upon party opinion leaders to exercise caution in characterizing even marginal groups such as lesbians and gay men.³⁹ In fact, a benchmark for projections of intolerance was Pat Buchanan's speech to the 35th Republican National Convention in 1992.⁴⁰ Buchanan's speech is a model of defamatory rhetoric, especially as it repeatedly positions Democratic candidates Clinton and Gore as queer through references to the Democratic Convention of that year as a "giant masquerade ball," as a display of "cross-dressing," and as a "big costume party." As Buchanan makes clear, the task of America is to reassert heteronormativity against a pervasive queerness that may disguise itself as straight and virtuous.⁴¹

By 1996, even though the Republican Party's cultural politics had not changed, party strategists pleaded for "cultural war" to be muffled under the "big tent" of GOP aspirations. Judging from position statements, voter guides, political organizing, and political training for religious conservatives, Christian

³⁶ Peter Carlson, *ibid.*, p. F5; emphasis in the original.

³⁷ Anna Marie Smith, "The Centering of Right-Wing Extremism through the Construction of an 'Inclusionary' Racism and Homophobia," *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁸ Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 169–171.

³⁹ John A. Moran, a co-chair of the Republican Leadership Council, was quoted as saying that the Republican Party needed to "soften the image of the party" and "avoid ideological purity." James L. Conn, "Rift on the Right: Right-Wing Strategist Paul Weyrich Says the Culture War is Lost, but Dobson, Robertson and Other Religious Right Leaders Insist They've Just Begun to Fight," *Church and State*, April 1999; available online at: <<http://www.au.org/churchstate/cs4991.htm>> (November 16, 2001).

⁴⁰ Pat Buchanan, "Address by Patrick J. Buchanan," in *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Republican National Convention Held in Houston, Texas* (Washington, DC: Republican National Committee, 1992), pp. 371–376.

⁴¹ For an account of anti-gay rhetoric in the in the 1992 Republican Convention, see Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–96.

Right leaders were anything but willing to abandon their fundamental principles on marriage, parental rights, family authority, and sexuality—the “family values” of New Right politics. While developing sophisticated political institutions and strategies, they continued to deliver Jeremiads linking God’s punishment on the nation with sin, and especially sexual sin. Among these new political strategies of the 1990s was a “rights pragmatism” that sought to engage the liberal rights claims of lesbians and gay men in the secular arena of liberal democratic politics. This pragmatism did not replace internal Christian Right discourses of “sin and seduction” and “disease and seduction,” but was turned outward toward mainstream political and legal actors and institutions.⁴²

Since the mid-1990s, Christian Right leaders have responded to the demands of partisan politics not only by addressing themselves in different ways to different audiences but by attempting to police the boundaries of their messaging more effectively, especially in terms of political statements in mainstream venues.⁴³ This phenomenon is noted by some observers; in their journalistic account of the relationship of the Christian Right and the gay movement, Bull and Gallagher note briefly that “the tune [the Christian Right] sang in public [was] far different than the one it sang in private.”⁴⁴ But the implications of the production and dissemination of quite different themes by the Christian Right movement are less thoroughly explored.

In her study of the multiple nodes of convergence between white supremacy and the Christian Right, Ann Burlein suggests two possible avenues for understanding the Christian Right’s multiple modes of address: “softening rhetoric” and “nichemarketing.” The first refers to explicit Christian Right pedagogy to followers in venues such as training seminars. By softening rhetoric—for example, teaching students not to make political appeals using Biblical authority—leaders hope to prepare followers for political work without inspiring charges of religious over-reaching and extremism.⁴⁵ By nichemarketing, Burlein refers to the way in which organizations such as Pete Peters’ Christian Identity and James Dobson’s Focus on the Family “sell” their respective brands of ideology; “each ministry speaks an idiom to its constituents.”⁴⁶ Christian Right leaders combine softening rhetoric and nichemarketing to create a complex set of rhetorics that can be directed at different audiences without compromising core theological and political messages.

So let us return to the *700 Club* interview. Falwell’s and Robertson’s statements attributing blame for the terrorist strikes were not intended to speak to feminists, abortion providers, lesbians and gay men, and the rest; they were not intended to persuade these actors to accept Christ or to change their sinful ways. Rather, the statements were intended for the audience of Christian followers of Falwell, Robertson, and other conservative Christian ministers—those for whom messages of this sort are both commonplace and credible. In fact, Falwell,

⁴² Didi Herman, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Such mainstream appearances include, for example, Pat Robertson’s appearances as a talking head on CNN during the 2000 presidential campaign and the subsequent electoral crisis.

⁴⁴ Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *op. cit.*, pp. 113–114.

⁴⁵ Ann Burlein, *Lift High the Cross: Where White Supremacy and the Christian Right Converge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 147–148.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Robertson, and other new Christian Right leaders have consistently delivered such messages to their followers as a way of constructing the "cultural exodus" of fundamentalists and other Christian proponents of Biblical inerrancy from political separatism to political engagement.⁴⁷

In Falwell's role as an apostle of born-again activism in the 1980s he delivered and published versions of a standard "stump sermon" across the US. In these sermons—delivered on television as well as live before thousands of congregants—Falwell made his case for the infiltration of born-again Christians, and Christian values, into every aspect of American social and professional life and warned of God's judgment on a nation without such intercession.

There is hardly a press conference in which someone doesn't ask me, "Do you believe AIDS is God's judgment against homosexuals"? I always say, "No, I don't believe that. I believe it is God's judgment against America, for endorsing immorality, even embracing it." I believe it is God's judgment against the whole society.⁴⁸

Messages such as these, widely available during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and early 1990s, were ignored or greeted with scorn by those whom Falwell and Robertson would identify as liberal "cultural elites." However, such arguments serve the purpose of constituting a particular conception of Biblically based history for born-again followers—indeed, of constituting particular kinds of believers who anticipate and fashion their own understandings of reality in accord with the "Word" being preached to them.

Falwell, Robertson, and others are aware that messages to their followers are accessible to their political adversaries. People for the American Way, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Political Research Associates, and other progressive organizations consistently monitor new Christian Right broadcasts, mailings and conferences and report back to their own members. At a more spontaneous grassroots level of political activity, anyone who tunes in to the *700 Club*, surfs Christian Right web sites, or signs up to receive the mailings of various conservative Christian organizations has access to messages that Falwell, Robertson, and others in the next generation of Christian Right leadership send to their followers. But most citizens lack the time and/or the inclination to consistently subject themselves to political messages that have little immediate salience for them. Political organizations on the left that function as voices critical of the Christian Right do not have a bottomless fund of public interest and attention on which to draw. On the other hand, public versions of these messages—including arguments about lesbian and gay attempts to secure "special rights"—do have a political impact and may be widely embraced by those who are unfamiliar with their theological and political foundations.

What do messages targeted at diverse audiences of, on the one hand, born-again (and potential born-again) followers, and on the other hand, unaffiliated outsiders look like? How are communications parsed by their intended consumers? Perhaps the most effective forum through which to examine the different kinds of messaging sent by the Christian Right is "ex-gay ministries." If forums such as direct mail, conventions, television broadcasts, and

⁴⁷ Susan Friend Harding, *op. cit.*, pp. 125–152.

⁴⁸ Falwell, quoted in Susan Friend Harding, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

web sites are intended as conduits for communications between leaders and followers, ex-gay ministries are forums intended for outsiders. Taken alongside the messages occasionally exposed in forums such as the Falwell–Robertson interview, the messages purveyed in the setting of ex-gay ministries are a primer to the cultural politics of the new Christian Right.

Liberating Homosexuals and Saving America

Jean Hardisty calls the ex-gay movement “the right’s kinder and gentler anti-gay campaign.”⁴⁹ The movement has as a stated goal encouraging and supporting people with a same-sex sexual orientation in an abiding reorientation to heterosexual desire and sexual functioning. The movement began in the 1970s as a reaction to the 1973 decision of the American Psychiatric Association to reclassify homosexuality from a mental disorder to a sexual orientation that merited a category in the DSM only to account for individuals who experienced conflict with their sexuality.⁵⁰ Mental health professionals who disapproved of the APA decision allied with Christian activists to create a network of groups and therapies, of which the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality (NARTH) and Exodus International are prominent. The tools of the ex-gay movement are conservative Christian religious doctrine and long-term “reparative therapies” intended to suppress homosexual behavior even if full heterosexual functioning cannot be achieved. The APA and other associations of mental health professionals oppose the therapies employed by the ex-gay movements, noting that “potential risks” of reparative therapies include “depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since therapist alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient.”⁵¹

Although the ex-gay movement is nearly 30 years old, it was only in the late 1990s that activists introduced the movement to the American public through mainstream media. This introduction began in 1998 when 15 Christian Right organizations, including the Christian Coalition, purchased a series of full-page ads in the *Washington Post* (July 14, 1998), *New York Times* (July 15), *USA Today* (July 15), and *Washington Times* (July 15). Entitled “Truth in Love,” the ads in the first three mainstream venues claim success for reparative therapies in converting homosexuals into heterosexuals and carry a message of religious redemption. On the other hand, the “Reggie White/In Defense of Free Speech” ad published in the conservative *Washington Times* takes an aggressive

⁴⁹ Jean Hardisty, *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), p. 116.

⁵⁰ Hannah Lerman, *Pigeonholing Women’s Misery: A History and Critical Analysis of the Psychodiagnosis of Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

⁵¹ American Psychiatric Association, “Position Statement on Therapies Focused on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation (Reparative or Conversion Therapies),” 2000; available online at: <http://www.psych.org/pract_of_psych/copptherapyaddendum83100.cfm> (November 28, 2001). It is useful to note that there are differences between the responses of mental health organizations to “reparative therapies.” In 1997, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution that stopped short of labeling the “therapies” unethical and merely imposed some safeguards on their applications. Organizations such as NARTH strongly opposed the resolution.

rhetorical stance. The ad accuses "the activist homosexual lobby" of using "its free speech privilege to promote its own ideas." The text continues:

believing they've captured the culture's ear, they [activist homosexuals] have become a jealous lover ... demanding the culture hear no other view but theirs ... [A]ll Americans should shudder when homosexual activists routinely use the tactics of threats, intimidation, blackmail and deception to strangle a free and open exchange on homosexual behavior.⁵²

Unlike other ads in the series, the *Washington Times* ad is explicitly political and is aimed at an audience that is assumed to be religious, conservative, and anti-gay. Besides appearing in newspapers, the "Truth in Love" ads continued on television in 1998 and 1999. Ads aired in the Washington, DC market in an attempt to influence policymakers on lesbian and gay political issues.⁵³

In ex-gay discourse the emphasis is on sexual behavior, rather than on love, desire, or "orientation." The newspaper ads excoriate "homosexual behavior," "self-destructive behavior," and "yielding to temptation."⁵⁴ Accordingly, success is counted as persuading lesbians and gay men to change sexual behavior or to become celibate. But there is also a tacit goal associated with the ads and with the ex-gay movement as a whole—underscoring the equation of minority sexual orientation with "choice." As Hardisty notes, a primary objective of the ex-gay movement is to

reinforc[e] the "No special rights" argument. If lesbians and gay men can change, their sexuality is not immutable. The ex-gay movement rebukes gay rights by asserting that gay sexuality is a choice. As such, the right argues, it is not a candidate for civil rights protections.⁵⁵

Commentators extend different readings to the Christian Right's "no special rights" agenda formulated in recent political battles in Oregon, Colorado, Hawaii and Vermont. For many critics, conservative Christian "special rights" rhetoric is meretricious; it is strategic to its core, reflecting Christian Right prejudice and political interests. The deployment of "special rights" rhetoric is undeniably politically strategic, appearing as it does in the context of specific debates over rights claims. However, Christian Right hostility to homosexuality as unnatural and ungodly is also consistent with a range of other Christian Right positions: on "the family," on gender roles, on leadership and authority, and even on the market economy and entrepreneurship.⁵⁶ We need not conclude that

⁵² Focus on the Family, "Toward an Open Debate on Homosexual Behavior," 1998; available online at: < <http://www.family.org/cforum/research/papers/a0002800.html> > (November 28, 2001).

⁵³ Religious Tolerance, " 'Ex-Gay' Advertisements: In Newspapers and on TV"; available online at: < http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_ads.htm > (November 6, 2001).

⁵⁴ Focus on the Family, "Toward a New National Discussion of Homosexuality," 1998; available online at: < <http://www.family.org/cforum/research/papers/a0002799.html> > (November 28, 2001).

⁵⁵ Jean Hardisty, *op. cit.*, p. 118. See also a critique of the ex-gay movement as "Calculated Compassion": Surina Khan, "Calculated Compassion: How the Ex-Gay Movement Serves the Right's Attack on Democracy," Political Research Associates, Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and Equal Partners in Faith, 1998; available online at: < <http://www.publiceye.org/equality/x-gay/X-Gay.htm> > (November 6, 2001).

⁵⁶ For connections between the usual arenas of Christian social conservatism and those of the economic right, see Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market, op. cit.*

anti-lesbian and gay rhetoric is purely malign and strategic—that it expresses no authentic theological convictions—merely because its practitioners apologize, equivocate, elide, and counter-accuse when they are caught engaging in the more blatant forms of it before a broad, national audience.

Consistent with Falwell's and Robertson's September 13 comments on the *700 Club* is another set of remarks, made by Robertson during the 8 June 1998 *700 Club* broadcast. Addressing himself to the Orlando, Florida gay pride parade and the controversy of "gay days" at Disneyland, Robertson said:

We better respond according to what the Bible says. The Apostle Paul made it abundantly clear in the Book of Romans that the acceptance of homosexuality is the last step in the decline of Gentile civilization. But if a condition like this will bring about the destruction of your nation, if it will bring about terrorist bombs, if it will bring about earthquakes, tornadoes and possibly a meteor, it isn't necessarily something we ought to open our arms to. And I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you.⁵⁷

After Robertson's comments were circulated to media outlets by critics, he defended himself in another *700 Club* monologue (June 15th), noting that his original comments were taken out of context and then affirming that "if we continue to engage in various types of sexual conduct which is [sic] displeasing to God, then this country will not have the defenses we've enjoyed for such a long time."⁵⁸

Adhering to his pattern in such circumstances, Robertson both obfuscates the details of the original statement and reaffirms the belief that God punishes the sin of homosexuality by striking the nation that tolerates it. In this belief, Robertson is on firm Christian Right ground; for these believers, not only is same-sex sexuality "unbiblical and unnatural," but it is taken by Christian Right leaders to be "emblematic of a civilization's decline."⁵⁹ Indeed, in the 1998 Orlando, Florida episode, Robertson even foreshadows his and Falwell's more recent comments by linking terrorism with homosexuality. In the context of such a belief, tolerance—of moral disagreements in general and of same-sex sexuality in particular—is not a positive civic value that undergirds democratic regimes. It is an invitation to God to vent his wrath on the tolerant.

Our Forefathers vs the Extremists

Leaders on the Christian Right make use of two distinct rhetorical tactics to legitimize their political views. While both tactics are evident in the messages sent to Christian Right insiders and to the general public, one tactic is deployed explicitly, while the other is usually deployed tacitly and abstractly. First, new Christian Right leaders enlist the support of historical democratic figures to "reconstruct the political terrain" and bolster their own claims to the tradition.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ PFAW, "Right Wing Watch Online," 1998; available online at: <<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=3939>> (November 11, 2001).

⁵⁸ Jeffery Jay Lowder, "The God of Terrorism," *Secular Web*, November 20, 2001; available online at: <http://www.infidels.org/secular_web/feature/1998/robertson.html>.

⁵⁹ Michael Lienesch, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Anna Marie Smith, "Why Did Armeey Apologize?," *op. cit.*, p. 168.

This strategy is obvious in the way that both Falwell and Robertson invoke Lincoln in their responses to the mainstream public outcry over their September 13 comments. Likewise, Ken Connor of the Family Research Council invokes George Washington and Benjamin Franklin in his October 5 opinion piece "Reflections after the Terror."⁶¹ And the "Reggie White/Free Speech" ad published in the *Washington Times* deploys "Our Founding Fathers" against "activist homosexuals." Perhaps Lincoln is perceived as an appropriate choice following a presidential election campaign in which GOP spokespersons routinely reminded citizens that the Republican Party is the "party of Lincoln." But Lincoln, Washington, and other figures no doubt serve the function of locating Christian Right ideology in an authentic and uncorrupted heteronormative majoritarian Christian political tradition. Christian Right leaders play off revered democratic icons against contemporary political actors and ideologies to the detriment of present-day preoccupations with anti-racism, multiculturalism, sexual and familial diversity, and religious pluralism.⁶²

It may be that recurring to prominent figures to authenticate contemporary beliefs and investments owes something to the well-documented fantasy in domestic right-wing movements of the US as a unique "Edenic society."⁶³ The assertion that America is a "Christian nation" ("God's Country") with a special eschatological mission is common within the Christian Right and is associated with Falwell and Robertson, as well as many others. Although the claim carries with it different shades of meaning in different contexts, it is highly contested by critics both as an empirical claim and as a normative injunction.⁶⁴

A second, and more tacit, political tactic is evident when Christian Right leaders are able to gesture toward often-unspecified "extremists" to legitimate their own political beliefs. When Robertson defended his June 1998 statement about divine control of weather patterns near Orlando, he did so by denying that his comments were "extreme." Christian Right leaders frequently deny hateful motivations and bias and tacitly position themselves between purveyors of hate on the left and those on the Right. In Robertson's original verbal response to Falwell's attributions of blame he alludes to the safety of the "major population" in a way that seems to exclude those who embody the enumerated sins. In so doing, Robertson trades on centrist/mainstream distaste for perverts and "extremist" liberal elites to position born-again Christians on the side of Americans who are not beyond saving. Of course, this centering of Christian Right politics has, by and large, not been successful among lesbians and gay men. Ironically, lesbian and gay perceptions of the Christian Right and of leaders such

⁶¹ Ken Connor, 2001, "Reflections after the Terror," *Family Research Council*, October 10, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.frc.org/get/pd01j1.cfm?CFID=14334&CFTOKEN=44056786>>.

⁶² For an explicit example of this argument, see the careful linking of the putative Christian beliefs of the founders with the beliefs, practices, and policies of the 1994 "freshman" class of Congressional Republicans. David Barton, "America's Founding Fathers: Were They Christians?," in Bill Perkins (ed.), *Stealing the Mind of America Volume II* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 1997), pp. 34–38.

⁶³ David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 7.

⁶⁴ See Michael Lienesch, *op. cit.*

as Falwell and Robertson as extremists delayed some forms of lesbian and gay organizing against anti-gay conservative Christian politics until the mid-1990s.⁶⁵

Lesbian and gay activists, such as those who picketed Robertson's staged Harlem, New York announcement of his 1988 presidential candidacy, frequently stand in as leftist extremists and reinforce the reasonable and righteous nature of the Christian Right cause.⁶⁶ As for the other side of the political continuum, students of right-wing discourse point out that extreme right-wing ideas—on race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism—function to center and legitimize ostensibly more benign expressions, even when there is little or no distinction between the content of the ideas themselves.⁶⁷ It turns out that there are a number of actors on the political Right whose message reproduces the message that the reverends Falwell and Robertson delivered on September 13. One example is Kansas pastor Fred Phelps, whose activism—including picketing the funerals of AIDS and hate-crime victims with signs that read “God Hates Fags”—has earned him a national reputation for ambitious anti-gay bigotry. In the months after the terrorist attacks, Phelps added specific commentaries to his Westboro Baptist Church web sites that clarify the causal link between same-sex sexual conduct (“sodomy”) and collective terrorist victimization.⁶⁸ Explaining that the September 11 terrorist attacks are the direct result of widespread social tolerance of the sin of sodomy, Phelps offers a timely set of lyrics to be sung to the tune of “America the Beautiful” and, for those with appropriate computer software, a choir singing those lyrics:

O wicked land of sodomites/Your world trade center's gone/With crashing planes and burning flames/To hell your souls have flown/America/America/ God showed his wrath to thee!/He cursed this land/With his own hand/And showed His sovereignty.⁶⁹

In addition to sermonizing on the causes of terrorism, Phelps also denounces the more tepid Christianity of Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and George W. Bush. Such denunciations no doubt reinforce these actors' claims to political moderation.

Phelps himself is not an important figure in Christian Right politics, and his views do not resonate with large numbers of Americans. Quite the contrary: his views seem to be anathema to most Americans who are familiar with him. Even if these citizens do not need to understand themselves as “tolerant” in the sense

⁶⁵ See Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York and London: Anchor Books, 1995), p. 335. Unfortunately, Vaid borrows Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism to paint the Christian Right as an “extremist movement,” and this move obscures more than it reveals about the movement's theology and politics. Vaid, *ibid.*, pp. 336–338.

⁶⁶ Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jessie Daniels, *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ann Burlein, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Lest anyone mistake the message of the site, it can be located on the web at: <<http://www.godhatesamerica.com>> with links to: <<http://www.godhatesfags.com>>.

⁶⁹ Fred Phelps, “God Hates America Sermons from WBC Pastor Fred Phelps, Sr,” *Westboro Baptist Church*, April 6, 2002; available online at: <<http://www.godhatesamerica.com/html/songnsersmons.html>>.

of liberal pluralism, they probably find his gleeful sadism repugnant. Phelps's importance lies in the fact that his extremism and that of other far right-wing actors works to center the views of Christian Right leaders like Falwell, Robertson, James Dobson, Gary Bauer, and others.⁷⁰ Although the contents of the *700 Club* and Westboro Church messages are strikingly similar, trusted mainstream messengers of bias benefit from the extravagant, even pornographic, hatred expressed by figures such as Phelps.⁷¹ Mainstream Christian Right leaders wish to deflect their followers from tolerance toward a degenerate society. But this mandate is perpetually in tension with a belief in America's special role in God's destiny for humanity. Thus, Christian Right leaders always temper contempt for cultural sinfulness with the potential for salvation and national atonement in ways that are not immediately apparent in the writings of far-Right figures such as Phelps.

The general agreement on the Christian Right that God permits nations to be punished for the sins of their people leaves open the question of how the deity apportions blame at particular historical moments. Falwell himself raises this question in an exculpatory fashion in his interview with the *Washington Post*. There, he notes that he is humbled by the many criticisms of his September 13 comments to reflect upon the many forms of tolerance of evil—citing, for example, a "sleeping church"—for which he and members of the born-again Christian community are responsible. During the uproar over the Falwell–Robertson comments, many Christian commentators pointed out that it was presumptuous for anyone to believe that they could discern the specific purposes of God, even though they agreed that the terrorist acts probably constituted some form of punishment on the US as a nation. An anthropologist doing fieldwork with conservative Protestants in east Tennessee at the time of the attacks lends support to this formulation of the issue of terrorist strikes on US soil. Elisha notes that although the evangelicals he works with embrace a theology of blame, many are still critical of Falwell, believing not only that human beings cannot discern divine purposes but that "moral accusations must be tempered."⁷² Despite his own emphasis on the diversity of viewpoints among

⁷⁰ See also the contribution to the debate over the causes of terrorism on the Creator's Rights Party web site: "The vast majority of American citizens have proven themselves willing to tolerate the most grievous sin rather than risk offending any significant group in this nation, like the abortion advocates or the homosexuals or other sexual outlaws ... But mark these words well[:] when nuclear or biological terror settles over this nation in the months and years ahead, that bold mocking of the God of Abraham will change." Neal Horsley, October 14, 2001, "USA Nuked Because of Freedom?," *Creator's Rights Party*, March 3, 2002; available online at: <<http://www.christiangallery.com/nukethreat.html>>.

⁷¹ The following argument is arguably ideologically closer to that expressed by Falwell and Robertson, but it is difficult to differentiate from the ostensibly more extreme "Creator's Rights Party" version: "In the wake of the September 11 barbaric terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and many other acts of terrorism in recent days, not only in America but around the world—one cannot help but wonder about the correlation of these events with the ever-increasing tearing down of the Christian beliefs upon which the U.S.A. was founded, and the Judaeo-Christian (sic) ethic upon which much of our Western society has been built ... Let us not forget other recent societies who also ignored God—including those of Hitler and Stalin!" Dick Innes, "Why Terrorism?," *ACTS International*, 2001; available online at: <http://www.gospelcom.net/actsi/helps_terrorism1.htm> (January 20, 2002).

⁷² One such Christian approach challenges those who attend principally to saving America to minister instead to the "brokenness" of individuals who are "postmodernists,"

conservative Protestants, however, even Elisha concedes that “millions” of conservative Christians “firmly support” Falwell and Robertson’s attribution of desert for the attacks.

There is no doubt that same-sex sexuality evokes outrage in the majority of Christian Right followers.⁷³ In spite of the injunction to “love the sinner and hate the sin,” communiqués between leaders and followers resonate with disgust and the conviction of divine punishment associated with same-sex sexuality. In this, the Christian Right expresses the “outraged feelings” that John Stuart Mill associates with religious attempts to stifle non-conforming individual forms of expression and condemns in *On Liberty*.⁷⁴ However, even this rebuke is ambiguous. Mill himself seems to countenance much more of the kind of social disapprobation expressed through “distaste, contempt and shaming” than is usually identified with him, particularly when those shamed pursue “lower pleasures” and exhibit what he casts as a “miserable individuality.”⁷⁵ Christian Right descriptions of same-sex sexuality are lurid accounts of the miserable individuality of gays, and particularly of gay men.⁷⁶ Descriptions of lesbians and gay men as committed to nothing more than intense sexual pleasure do have the ironic effect of heightening the attractiveness of homosexuality for anxious Christian Right audiences. But they also stabilize distinctions between our selfless, heroic, godly ancestors and the lubricious, demonic homosexuals who must be opposed. Even as Christian Right leaders rhetorically and politically reinforce this distinction, a Christian Right politics of desert often is not aimed directly at lesbians and gay men. Rather, it is aimed at Americans who do not use the levers of law and social policy to punish and proscribe homosexuality. In the final analysis, these Americans are the “we” who bring down God’s wrath on America.

The Politics of Desert

Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson agree with one another that Americans got “probably what we deserve” in the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. Whatever observers believe about the views the two Christian Right leaders shared that day, it is clear that both were chagrined that their comments were broadcast to the nation and that both attempted to reverse the damage to

(Footnote continued)

feminists, homosexuals, and liberals. See Rich Nathan, *Who is My Enemy? Welcoming People the Church Rejects* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

⁷³ See reporting of the Barna Group research on Christians’ views of homosexuality (2001). The Barna Research Group, Ltd. is a Christian marketing research company that provides information and analysis on attitudes and cultural trends. *Barna Research Online*, “Born Again Adults Remain Firm in Opposition to Abortion and Gay Marriage,” July 23, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=94&Reference=B>> (March 10, 2002).

⁷⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1859/1994).

⁷⁵ Joseph Hamburger, *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1861/1979).

⁷⁶ See e.g. an interview with anti-gay “researcher” Paul Cameron: Robert Dreyfuss, “The Holy War On Gays,” *Rolling Stone*, March 18, 1999; available online at: <http://www.pflagdetroit.org/Holy_War_OnGays.htm> (March 6, 2002).

their mainstream reputations. Falwell apologized in his fashion; Robertson dissociated himself from the remarks in his fashion.

If Falwell and Robertson's comments assigning blame for the terrorist attack were no more than the appearance of isolated personal views in public discourse, there would be little more to say on the subject. Mill's elegant delineation of the "morality of public discussion" notwithstanding, it is utopian to expect that "malignity, bigotry, or intolerance of feeling" will ever be expunged from the political realm.⁷⁷ However, the sentiments expressed by these leaders of the Christian Right are neither isolated nor merely personal. Rather, they are theologically and politically complex rhetorics formulated by one group of others. Such rhetorics provoke and ratify the production and dissemination of ideology and the mobilization of financial, intellectual, and institutional resources. However angry, eloquent, or sympathetic, the vast majority of rejoinders to Falwell and Robertson's comments individualized their sentiments without contextualizing them either theologically *or* politically. These rejoinders also failed to inquire about the impact that the comments have on Christian Right followers and on those named in the cultural indictment. Hence, these commentators missed opportunities—to explicate Christian Right theology with regard to end-times, sexual sin, and national transgression and to explicate the rhetorical, ideological, and institutional components of the Christian Right's politics of desert, a politics deeply related to its "national campaign against gay rights" from the 1980s to the present.⁷⁸

The occasional eruptions of New Christian Right discourse into mainstream attention can yield considerable information about the cultural politics of the current "family values" movement, but to make sense of them we must be attentive to the multiple forms of address favored by Christian Right leaders. These leaders practice small duplicities—such as apologies—in order to be misunderstood by the "major population." It is important to recognize that non-believers—for born-again believers, those (including Jews) who have not yet found Christ—have a crucial role to play in the theology and eschatology of the Christian Right. In the little tribulation of present-day America, non-believers fulfill unaware the end-time narrative of descent into sin and secularism and are the objects of Christian missionary action. They fix and occupy the boundary of God's church, for "the disbelief of outsiders is a precondition of miraculous action."⁷⁹

In addition to the theological/ideological dimensions of the politics of desert, there is another dimension that is often overlooked by secular commentators, and this is the institutional dimension through which the pernicious fruits of intolerance are translated into legal and political action. Falwell, Robertson, and numerous other Christian Right leaders have founded parachurch organizations that disseminate Christian Right theology. But these leaders have also founded universities for the training of Christian Right professionals; lobbying organizations and political action committees; public interest law firms and news bureaus

⁷⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁷⁸ Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

⁷⁹ Susan Friend Harding, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

dedicated to the pursuit of Christian Right goals.⁸⁰ When the scope of inquiry expands beyond Falwell and Robertson as ministers and opinion leaders, the number and reach of such institutions and organizations is impressive.⁸¹ Indeed, noting phenomena as disparate as successful Christian Right action to influence international family planning policy and the public Christian testimonies of both 2000 Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, Michael Lind concludes that “[t]oday the Christian Right is far more powerful in American politics than for two centuries.”⁸²

As it is currently constituted, the Republican Party cannot do without the Christian Right in terms of electoral politics. The Christian Right constituency was necessary to elect the Republican freshman class of 1994 and to position George W. Bush for his dubious ascension to the presidency. Far from distancing himself from the theology and politics of the Christian Right, President Bush has courted this constituency with his personal witness and with a range of concrete policy positions on welfare, reproductive rights, lesbian and gay rights, and church–state relations.⁸³

Many Bush administration critics play the president’s putative intellectual deficiencies and his language of the heart for laughs. However, David Gutterman understands that Bush carefully positions himself and his socially conservative policies for a constituency of born-again Christian conservatives. Analyzing Bush’s autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*, as well as many of his public utterances, Gutterman concludes that Bush’s conversion narrative situates him as a “modern-day Moses,” his “quest for the White House” a “divine mission.” Gutterman finds in Bush’s connections to Focus on the Family’s James Dobson a “complicated and troubling intimation of Bush’s vision of the relationship between religion and politics.”⁸⁴ This troubling intimation does not only play out in domestic politics but also in the international arena in relationships and processes that receive little public attention. For example, even before the recent Mid-term elections and the acquisition of a Republican Senate majority, the Bush administration was moving to support Christian Right coalitions with Islamic governments to end progress on political protections for “gays, women, and children.” A Moroccan diplomat at one recent UN conference noted, “the main issue that brings us all together is defending the family values, the natural

⁸⁰ To list only a few examples, Pat Robertson founded the Christian Broadcasting Network, the Regent University School of Law, and the American Center for Law and Justice.

⁸¹ Many critics of the Right cite James Dobson’s organizations, Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and related organizations, as the most impressive and effective of Christian Right institutions currently in operation.

⁸² Michael Lind, “Fundamental Flaws,” *The Observer*, November 11, 2001; available online at: <<http://www.observer.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4296619,00.html>> (November 15, 2001). Lind also excoriates the environmental “romantic left” that he argues is increasingly substantively allied with the Christian Right.

⁸³ Jim VandeHei, “GOP Looks to Move Its Social Agenda,” *Washington Post*, November 25, 2002; available online at: <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34450-2002Nov24.html>> (December 1, 2002). See Anna Marie Smith, “The Politicization of Marriage in Contemporary American Public Policy: The Defense of Marriage Act and the Personal Responsibility Act,” *Citizenship Studies* 5:3 (2001), pp. 303–320.

⁸⁴ David S. Gutterman, “Presidential Testimony: Listening to the Heart of George W. Bush,” *Theory and Event* 5:2 (2001); available online at: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.2gutterman.html> (October 2, 2002).

family ... The Republican administration is so clear in defending the family values."⁸⁵

As examples like this suggest, the Christian Right is also dependent on the GOP to accomplish its goals and to globalize its influence.⁸⁶ On 16 February, 1999, in the wake of the failure of the US Senate to convict Bill Clinton for perjury for his testimony in the civil case of *Jones v Clinton*, conservative activist and President of the Free Congress Foundation, Paul Weyrich, released an open letter to the conservative movement that caused a sensation on the Right. In the letter, Weyrich suggested that the time had come for people of faith to concede the "collapse of [American] culture" and the loss of the "culture war." He suggested that although conservatives were able to get their candidates elected to office, they were not able to govern with a social conservative agenda; the cultural reality of Americans "tolerat[ing]" and "celebrat[ing]" the "intolerable" had finally precipitated the failure of politics. In such an atmosphere, he argued, conservatives can only withdraw from political attempts to reinstate "Judeo-Christian civilization" and practice separation from corrupt institutions.⁸⁷

Among those on the Christian Right who responded publicly to Weyrich were Pat Robertson and James Dobson, and both rejected Weyrich's call for surrender. Typically, Robertson responded in a press statement in which he denied that Christian conservatives were "ready to withdraw from the process we call democracy" and noted that the "future of America is at stake."⁸⁸ The results of both the 2000 Presidential election and the 2002 Mid-term Congressional elections vindicate the decision of Christian conservatives not to cede electoral politics to secular elites. Indeed, it is interesting to note Gary Bauer's speculation that Pat Robertson left his position of leadership in the Christian Coalition not because of backlash from his comments about the terror attacks, but because the position of Christian Right leader had "already been filled" by George W. Bush.⁸⁹

Of course, the many intersections of Bush administration policies and Christian Right politics do not demonstrate that Bush himself subscribes to a politics of desert. However, such a politics is an inextricable part of the agenda of the Christian Right. Moreover, although it is central to the current "family values" agenda—including the goals of prominent conservative Republicans in Congress—the politics of desert is the part of the broader theological and political project that Christian conservatives prefer not to share openly and explicitly with American citizens. If critics of Christian Right politics miss this crucial part of the message that Christian conservative leaders broadcast to followers, we will find ourselves unable to discern the deep structure of many of the political policies and strategies of our time.

⁸⁵ Colum Lynch, "Islamic Bloc, Christian Right Team Up to Lobby U.N.," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2002, pp. A1, A13.

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the relationship between the Christian Right and the Republican Party, see Chapter 13 ("And Who Shall Lead Them?") of William Martin, *With God On Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996).

⁸⁷ Paul M. Weyrich, "Paul Weyrich Letter," *Religious Freedom Coalition*, September 14, 2000; available online at: <<http://www.rfcnet.org/archives/weyrich.htm>> (November 11, 2001).

⁸⁸ James L Conn, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ Dana Milbank, "Religious Right Finds its Center in Oval Office: Bush Emerges as Movement's Leader after Robertson Leaves Christian Coalition," *Washington Post*, December 24, 2001, p. A2.

