

PART 1:
Inevitable Outcome of Conservative Christian Heterosexism
By Warren J. Blumenfeld

After a long series of costly court battles ending in mixed decisions, the Supreme Court of the United States decided on March 2, 2011 in favor of Fred Phelps and his family from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas by ruling that they did not violate their constitutional right of free speech by protesting the funerals of fallen members of the military.

Fred Phelps and his followers travel around the country protesting funerals of soldiers (most of whom are apparently heterosexual) claiming that these deaths resulted from God's punishment against a country that tolerates homosexuality. Church members wield signage stating, for example, "God Hates Fags" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers." Phelps is also notorious for his 1998 protest of the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a college student from the University of Wyoming in Laramie murdered in a cruel and ruthless homophobic assault.

The judicial process began when Albert Snyder, of York, Pennsylvania successfully won a law suit against Phelps, the founder of the Westboro Baptist Church, and his followers for picketing the 2006 funeral of Snyder's son, 20-year-old Marine Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder, who was killed in a vehicle rollover accident in Iraq. At the lower court trial, the jury awarded Snyder \$11 million, which the court later reduced to \$5 million.

Later, on March 26, 2010, the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that Snyder was unjustified in suing Phelps and company. The court also ordered Snyder to cover Phelps's court costs in the amount of \$16,510.

Snyder appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, which handed down its ruling by determining that the protestors' actions were within the scope of protected speech covered by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and were not circumscribed by issues of privacy and religious rights of the mourners.

While not many would doubt that Phelps's words and actions go well beyond civil discourse and represent religious dogma and intolerance taken to an extreme, the critical question to be asked here is, "In what ways have some Christian denominations' biblical interpretations of same-sex sexuality and relationships paved the way for members of the Westboro Baptist Church to spew their particularly objectionable brand of invective?" In other words, "How have other denominations been complicitous in promoting institutional and societal heterosexism?"

While a number of Christian denominations have and are currently defending the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people, and are openly welcoming them into their congregations, and some into the ranks of their clergy, a number of the more conservative denominations have released official statements, doctrines, and policies in opposition. I include some selective examples:

Catholic Catechism: 1997: #2357 "...Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.' They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life [reproduction]. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved."

During his 2010 end-of-the-year Vatican address, Pope Benedict XVI implied that homosexuality is as great a threat to humankind as climate change. He argued that saving humanity from homosexual behavior is as important as saving the rainforest from destruction. Humanity, he asserted, needs to "listen to the language of creation" to realize the intended roles of man and woman. He warned of the "blurring" of the natural distinctions between males and females, and called for humanity to protect itself from self-destruction. The Pope compared behavior beyond traditional heterosexual relations as "a destruction of God's work."

Southern Baptist Convention: 2010 "Resolution on Homosexuality and the United States Military": "RESOLVED, That the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention...affirm the Bible's declaration that homosexual behavior is intrinsically disordered and sinful, and we also affirm the Bible's promise of forgiveness, change, and eternal life to all sinners (including those engaged in homosexual sin) who repent of sin and trust in the saving power of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)."

Evangelical Covenant Church: "Resolution on Sexuality" adopted 1996: "We human beings misuse God's creation of sexuality and distort its role in our lives. In I Corinthians 6:9-10 and Romans 1:24-27, Scripture succinctly declares this sin and God's judgment on it. Throughout the Scriptures we see how sin in sexual relationships damages relationship with God and others. We live in a society characterized by imperfect and sinful sexual relationships of many kinds.... Evangelical Covenant Church resolution to care for persons involved in sexual sins such as adultery, homosexual behavior, and promiscuity compassionately recognizing the potential of these sins to take the form of addiction."

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: "Homosexual behavior violates the commandments of God, is contrary to the purposes of human sexuality, distorts loving relationships, and deprives people of the blessings that can be found in family life and in the saving ordinances of the gospel. Those who persist in such behavior or who influence others to do so are subject to Church discipline. Homosexual behavior can be forgiven through sincere repentance." From Handbook of Instructions

While these official policies, which are seemingly less venomous than Phelps and company's "God Hates Fags," are they any less inflammatory? Are they any less capable of inciting harassment, bullying, and violence?

So next time we want simply to dismiss Phelps and his followers as "just a bunch of crazy extremists," let us investigate the fuller picture by addressing where these attitudes and behaviors stem.

PART 2:
Conservative Christian Heterosexism:
With Religious Rights Come Responsibilities
By Warren J. Blumenfeld

I recently wrote a commentary titled “Inevitable Outcomes of Conservative Christian Heterosexism” (www.public.iastate.edu/~wblumen) in response to the Supreme Court ruling determining that Fred Phelps and his family from the Westboro Baptist Church were within their legal rights to free speech in demonstrating at military funerals as God’s punishment on a country that tolerates homosexuality.

Since then, I have been corresponding with a conservative Christian friend who has critiqued my commentary with a number of primary statements and questions. What following is my open response.

The Recent Supreme Court Decision

My friend states and asks:

“How do we in our diverse society allow (i.e., “tolerate,” in the old meaning of “putting up with something you don't like”) others to be different, even objectionable, without attempting to silence them? Because if they are contributing and (at some level) supporting vile and deeply offensive behavior (like that of the Westboro folks), then an argument can be made that they ought to be silenced. I'm uncomfortable with that conclusion, as were 8 of the 9 Supreme Court justices).

You may be surprised, but I agree with the Supreme Court decision. Yes, I too believe that Fred Phelps and company, while certainly vile, were within their rights of free speech. Until and unless we as a society and until and unless the judiciary develop clear and consistent demarcations between “free speech” and “hate speech,” the court had no other option than to rule as it did. The demarcations may never be developed due to the enormity in constructing the boundaries.

In like fashion, I believe the neo-Nazis had a right to march through the largely Jewish town of Skokie, Illinois. I believe Fred and family had a right as well to demonstrate here at Iowa State University two years ago on the premise that the university was “supporting its fags” by establishing an Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Student Services,” and demonstrating in front of the Jewish Museum in Des Moines on their allegation that “the Jews killed the Lord.” Sure, they have a right to do so.

Am I Practicing “Reverse Discrimination”?

My friend continued:

“Your article struck me as an attempt to intimidate and silence those Christians who have beliefs about homosexuality with which you disagree. It's almost like you are saying: ‘Give up your

beliefs where they disagree with my own, or really you're just a less extreme version of Westboro, different in degree but not in kind'."

In response to this statement, this is not merely a "disagreement." This is a clear-cut incident around issues of power, marginalization, subordination, and control. This is not a "disagreement," for example, between, say, the Democrats and Republicans over the best ways to put the economy on a more stable footing, or about getting people back to work. It is not a "disagreement" of competing party philosophies between smaller government on one hand and more services provided directly by the federal government on the other.

No, this is not a "disagreement" at all! It again has to do with issues of power and control; it goes to who has the power to define "the other" and who has the power and control to define "the self": the individual and members of a social identity group, or rather, the Church (with a capital "C").

I single out conservative Christian denominations specifically in a United States on the basis of their Christian privilege. Stemming from Peggy McIntosh's pioneering investigations of white and male privilege, we can, by analogy, understand Christian privilege as constituting a seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians, with which they often unconsciously walk through life as if effortlessly carrying a knapsack tossed over their shoulders. This system of benefits confers dominance on Christians while subordinating members of other faith communities as well as non-believers. These systemic inequities are pervasive throughout the society. They are encoded into the individual's consciousness and woven into the fabric of our social institutions, resulting in a stratified social order privileging dominant ("agent") groups while restricting and disempowering subordinate ("target") groups.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" describes the ways in which the dominant group, in this case Christians in general and predominantly Protestants, successfully disseminate dominant social realities and social visions in a manner accepted as "common sense," as "normal," and as "universal." This religious hegemony maintains the marginality of already marginalized religions, faiths, and spiritual communities.

Hegemony is advanced through what Michel Foucault terms "discourses," which include the ideas, written expressions, theoretical foundations, and language of the dominant culture. These are implanted within networks of social and political control, described by Foucault as "regimes of truth," which function to legitimize what can be said, who has the authority to speak and be heard, and what is authorized as true or as the truth.

The concept of oppression, then, constitutes more than the cruel and repressive actions of individuals upon others, for example, the actions and words of Fred Phelps and his followers. It involves an overarching system of differentials of social power and privilege by dominant groups over subordinated groups based on ascribed social identities and reinforced by unequal social group status. And this is not merely the case in societies ruled by coercive or tyrannical leaders but occurs, according to Iris Marion Young, within the day-to-day practices of contemporary democratic societies such as the United States.

So, anyone can believe anything they wish, including that homosexuality and transgender expression allegedly goes against "God's plan" and that anyone who engages in same-sex "behavior" and/or transgender expressions are "sinners," "sodomites," "perverts," or any of the numerous other epithets they lodge, and that we will go to Hell unless we "repent." Sure, believe what they will. They can also believe that Jews and Blacks, for example are inferior forms of life, without being oppressive to them and without being supportive of people like those at Westboro.

Beliefs are one's rights to hold. However, the EXPRESSION of those beliefs onto an individual or group of individuals IS a form of oppression, especially when intended to deny LGBT people (or Jews or Blacks, among many other groups) their human and civil rights, and is, therefore, a form of complicity with those at Westboro.

By so doing, they are exerting power and control by attempting to define "the other." They are attempting to deprive us of our agency and our subjectivity. They are attempting to control our bodies and our minds.

With religious rights come responsibilities, and with actions come reactions. Whenever clergy pronounce and preach their conservative dogma on sexuality and gender expression, they must take responsibility for the bullying, harassment, violence against and suicides of LGBT people in their congregations, communities, and country.

Therefore, we have a right, no, an obligation to counter this destructive and, yes, oppressive discourse with all the voices, the energy, the unity, the intelligence, and all the love of which we are capable.

So no, this is no simple "disagreement." It is instead a fight for our very survival and especially for the survival of our youth who must struggle on a daily basis in their homes, schools, communities, and yes, their churches against the negatively and assaults on their identities, their bodies, and their souls. The spate of recent gay youth suicides was only the most visible tip of the continuing long-term epidemic of young people who live in a society that teaches them to hide and to hate themselves.

I titled my previous commentary "Inevitable Outcome of Conservative Christian Heterosexism" because I argue that Fred Phelps and his followers, though very extreme in their tactics and rhetoric, represent a placement upon a continuum, and their placement comprises an ultimate and "inevitable" manifestation of the heterosexist discourses emanating from some conservative Christian congregations within the United States and abroad.

Many well-intentioned and loving ministers and congregants who diametrically oppose and condemn the words and actions of Phelps' Westboro Church, I am sure believe that they may be offering members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities "the gift of Jesus" in their attempts to "bring us out of the 'homosexual lifestyle'." I have met many of these loving people with good intentions.

We must, however, separate “intent” from “impact”: their intent may be well-meaning, but their impact is, yes, oppressive going back to my discussion of power, subordination, control, and the denial of agency and subjectivity.

Personal Examples

Each semester I teach the course CI 406, “Multicultural Foundations in Schools and Society,” in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Iowa State University: a large Midwestern state tax supported land-grant university. I base the course on a number of key concepts and assumptions, including how issues of power, privilege, and domination within the United States center around inequitable social divisions in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sex, gender identity and expression, sexual identity, religion, nationality, linguistic background, physical and mental ability/disability, and age. We address how issues around social identities impact generally on life outcomes, and specifically on educational outcomes. Virtually all students registered for this course, which is mandatory for students registered in the teacher education program, are pre-service teachers.

Throughout the course, I discuss the concept of social identities, and toward the beginning of the course, I ask students to turn the spotlight and mirror inward by developing an awareness of their various social identities and their social group memberships. I discuss the ways in which we hold concurrent “social identities” (consciously or unconsciously) based on “socially constructed” categories, and how these identities are ascribed to us by others, sometimes at our birth, how sometimes we self-identify, or how we achieve identities throughout our lives.

I model for my students what I mean by “social identities” by listing some of my own identities, for example, race (white), ethnicity (Jewish), socioeconomic class (raised working class, currently middle class), sex (male), gender identity (a mixture of more feminine and some masculine), sexual identity (gay or queer), religion (Jewish), nationality (Jewish U.S.-American of Polish and Hungarian descent), linguistic background (U.S.-English), physical and mental ability/disability (visual limitations which prevent me driving a car), and age (late middle age).

Many students show surprise by this assignment since most of them grew up in largely homogenous small rural communities where the vast majority come from European-white and Christian (primarily Protestant) backgrounds, and where most people look like themselves.

Of particular surprise to me were the writings of two female undergraduate students who, though in different courses during different years, seemed to come to the same conclusion. On a final course paper, one student wrote that, while she enjoyed the course, and felt that both myself and my graduate assistance—who had come out to the class earlier as lesbian—were very knowledgeable and good professors with great senses of humor, nonetheless, she felt obliged to inform us that we are still going to Hell for being so-called “practicing homosexuals.”

Another student two years later wrote on her course paper that homosexuality and transgenderism are sins in the same category as stealing and murder. This student not only reiterated that I will travel to Hell if I continued to act on my same-sex desires, but she went further in amplifying the first student’s proclamations by self-righteously insisting that I will not

receive an invitation to enter Heaven since I am Jewish and if I do not accept Jesus as my personal savior, regardless of my sexual behavior. Anyone who doubts this, she concluded, “Only death will tell!”

She was referring to sections of the Christian Bible, for example:

1 Thessalonians 2:15-16: “[T]he Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out, the Jews who are heedless of God’s will and enemies of their fellow man....All this time they have been making up the full measure of their guilt, and now retribution has overtaken the good of all.”

Revelation 2:9: “The Jews...are Satan’s synagogue.”

Revelation 3:9: “I will make those of Satan’s synagogue, who claim to be Jews but are lying frauds, come and fall down at your feet.”

I told my friend that I just returned from my ancestral village of Krosno, Poland, where I gave a presentation at “Jewish Day,” commemorating the maternal side of my family, the Mahlers. The event was very moving as I talked about my relatives who lived in Krosno, most of whom, along with 2700 other Jewish residents, were murdered by the Nazis. It was a healing event and an occasion for reconciliation and reflection addressing Jewish and Christian relations in Poland’s past and an example of how we can move forward.

As a student of history, I understand the long trajectory of Jewish history, and also of members of sexual and gender minoritized communities, and of issues of anti-Jewish and anti-LGBT oppression. What begins as religious condemnations throughout history has resulted in social divisions, marginalization, expulsions, enslavement, forced conversions, and extermination.

This also includes issues of around socially constructed categories of “race.” For example, of the many slave ships, some were given the names the “Jesus,” the “Grace of God,” the “Angel,” the “Liberty,” and the “Justice.” Many slave ships had on board a Christian minister to help oversee the passage. In fact, it was not uncommon at this time for religious representatives to offer scriptural justifications for slavery, for example:

Ephesians 6:5-6: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”

1 Timothy 6:1-2: “Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.”

Titus 2:9-10: “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.”

In addition, the issue of slavery became a lightning rod in the 1840s among members of the Baptist General Convention, and in May 1845, 310 delegates from the Southern states convened in Augusta, Georgia, to organize a separate Southern Baptist Convention on a pro-slavery plank. To be a “good Christian,” they asserted, one had to support the institution of slavery, and could not join in the ranks of the abolitionists.

One-hundred and fifty years later, in June 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention officially apologized to African Americans for its support and collusion with the institution of slavery (regarding it now as an “original sin”), and also apologizing for its rejection of civil rights initiative of the 1950s and 1960s.

I ask then, how long will it take for conservative Christian and other religious denominations to apologize to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, to take responsibility for their religious rights?

Dr. Warren J. Blumenfeld, Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Iowa State University. He is co-editor of *Investigating Christian Privilege and Religious Oppression in the United States*, Editor of *Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price*, and co-editor of *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*.

Permission granted to forward, post, or publish this commentary. wblumen@iastate.edu