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Just Deserts: Ayn Rand and Christian Right

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Abstract

Churches and conservative religious organizations now conduct well-coordinated and effective compassionate pedagogies for their followers on contested social issues such as sexuality. In this essay, I examine the ways in which conservative compassion is put to work in Christian Right morality politics. I use the work of novelist Ayn Rand to analyze a variety of features of these campaigns, but especially the fixing and defending of boundaries between those who deserve compassion and those who do not. I argue that Rand provides a fruitful analytic for understanding how Christian conservative leaders conceptualize and execute their politics and pedagogy of compassion

Complicating Compassion

[1] Compassion is a significant form of political rhetoric and pedagogy on both the American left and right, however—or whether—it is operationalized in policy. On the political right, the conservative Christian movement is not generally associated with “compassionate conservatism,” a rubric that was first articulated with regard to conservative economic policies.[1] Certainly, the sexuality politics of the Christian right are more often identified as repressive and punitive than as evincing compassionate concern. However, the U.S. Christian right now conducts well-coordinated and effective compassionate pedagogies in the contested moral/cultural terrain of same-sex sexuality. Compassionate sexuality campaigns appear to conflict with other approaches to non-normative sexuality that are more harsh in tone and punitive toward their objects. Indeed, to many observers they may signal a completely new direction in conservative Christian politics and rhetoric. I argue that the application of compassion to same-sex sexuality is a significant development, though neither as new nor as far from more traditional condemnations of non-traditional sexuality as its proponents might claim.

[2] In this essay, taking compassion as an object of analysis “seeks ... to explain the dynamics of its optimism and exclusions.”[2] I examine conservative compassion as it is put to work in Christian right compassion campaigns on same-sex sexuality, and I use the work of novelist (and putative philosopher)

Ayn Rand to analyze the most salient feature of these campaigns: the fixing and defending of boundaries between those who deserve compassion and those who do not. Rand is renowned as a best-selling author, a popular philosopher, and a guru who created her own system of thought and her own cult of personality. There is a dearth of scholarship on Rand because she is not regarded as worthy of serious consideration by most academics. In spite of this rebuff to her claim to philosophy, by any estimation Rand has enjoyed a huge following and has influenced American political ideology.[3] What is striking is how many of her ideas anticipate the politics of the contemporary Christian right.

[3] Why turn to Rand to elucidate the role of compassion in the antigay politics of the Christian right? After all, like Nietzsche, Rand is an unrelenting critic of Christian morality, including an ideal of unconditional Christian love or charity. But this distinction between Rand and Christian ethics supposes a homogenous conception of Christianity that cannot be reconciled with the contemporary landscape of theological politics. In the U.S. today, Christian doctrines and denominations are distributed across the economic and political landscape, identified with a wide range of policies and ideologies from left progressivism to right conservatism. More important, these versions of Christianity are not only products of differing interpretations of scripture, as important as these diverse modes of exegesis are. The doctrines of sects, denominations, and other kinds of Christian groups are profoundly influenced by a variety of factors, including demographic shifts, social changes, perceptions of threat, and popular culture.[4]

[4] Rand is a thinker to be contended with in the realm of popular ideas. One example of her popularity is that when the Modern Library polled readers in 1998 to determine their favourite works of fiction, Rand scored four works in the top thirty selections, including *Atlas Shrugged* in first place and *The Fountainhead* in second.[5] *Atlas Shrugged* is Rand's monumental work of fiction: "the astounding story of a man who said that he would stop the motor of the world—and did." [6] In *Atlas*, Rand uses the sphere of industrial manufacturing as a backdrop for a philosophical, social, economic, psychological, and political conflict between two great isms: individualism and collectivism. *Atlas Shrugged* has sold over twenty million copies since its publication in 1957, but it is only one of many vehicles for the dissemination of Rand's ideas. In addition to novels and non-fiction writing, her ideas have been spread by Institutes and Centers dedicated to the exegesis and popularization of her philosophy, college and university Objectivist clubs, training seminars, newsletters, biographies, websites, blogs, and films.

[5] It is likely that many conservative Christian elites—like Americans from many walks of life—have imbibed Rand's work at an impressionable age. And anecdotal evidence from Objectivists suggests that many of their fellows have held a combination of ideas: libertarian in the economic realm and conservative in the social realm.[7] It is also likely that many Americans who are not Christian conservatives have absorbed Rand's philosophy in ways that make compassionate conservatism intuitively morally appealing. Like the

foundational ideas of other modern thinkers, Rand's ideas have passed into popular discourse, many having been detached from their origins in the specific texts of their idiosyncratic creator.

[6] In spite of the gap between Rand's popular fiction and non-fiction and the morality of the Gospels, there are strong similarities between particular dimensions of Christian right political ideology and Rand's thought. As we will see, Rand's own perspectives on gender complementarity and same-sex sexuality strongly suggest the morality politics of the Christian right. But moving beyond Rand's positions on gender and same-sexuality, Rand elucidates a mode of boundary production that bears fruitful similarities to that of the Christian right, even as she and the movement disagree on many particulars of ethics and the verisimilitude of religious faith.

[7] Rand's thought is also provocative in comparison to the ideology of the Christian right because of the movement's own embrace of laissez-faire capitalism.[8] Rand's strenuous defense of the purest versions of unregulated market capitalism can be found today among Christian conservative elites who read the Bible as a brief for capitalism and those who defend the economically conservative positions of the Bush administration and the Republican New Right. Thus, multiple continuities—socially conservative positions on gender and sexuality, modes of setting boundaries for compassion, and an unparalleled defense of laissez-faire capitalism—inspire a return to the Randian canon as a resource for contemporary American political ideology.

[8] I do not argue that the Christian right relies upon Rand in any kind of deliberate way; such an explicit appeal would extremely unlikely given Rand's disdain for superstition, a category that for her would include mainstream Christian doctrines. Even if Christian conservative leaders do not turn to Rand to justify ideas, however, her work provides a useful analytic lens for reconstructing and understanding a particular ideological configuration of ideas and projects, not only in secular conservatism but also in the variant of conservatism deployed by the Christian right. With regard to same-sex sexuality, Christian conservative leaders carry out a politics of compassion while teaching their followers how to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving. In what follows I will show how the famous contours of Ayn Rand's beliefs about gender, same-sex sexuality, and the appropriate dimensions of compassion both anticipate and help to elucidate the compassion campaigns of the Christian right.

Compassion Campaigns and Antigay Pedagogy

[9] As Lauren Berlant notes in *Compassion*, there are many versions and definitions of this prolix term. One way to understand compassion is as “an emotion in operation;” compassion is relational, alluding to the action between sufferer(s) and actors who are capable of responding to or alleviating suffering. There is also a pedagogical dimension to compassion: “it is crucial to appreciate the multitude of conventions around the relation of feeling to practice where compassion is concerned. In a given scene of suffering, how do we know what

does and what should constitute sympathetic agency?”[9] Members of social movements learn what constitutes appropriate compassionate agency in part through targeted moral and political instruction. In the case of the Christian right, moral and theological instruction and policy goals are linked together and disseminated by ministries and national organizations, as well as through Christian popular culture.[10]

[10] The principal arena for compassion campaigns in the area of gay rights is the ex-gay movement, which offers a variety of therapies to treat unwanted same-sex desire. It is worth noting that, like Christian conservative therapists, Objectivist therapists have practiced reparative therapies intended to reorient homosexuals to heterosexual desire and functioning.[11] Besides therapies, the ex-gay movement includes instruction for conservative Christians on the origins and treatment of same-sex desire. Ex-gay pedagogy rests on narratives of development that seek to chart etiologies of same-sex desire. Compassion follows from a developmental understanding of the origins of same-sex sexual desire. In this understanding, people do not choose same-sex attraction but are conditioned for it by failures (or perceptions of failure) in their early relationships. Because dysfunctional family dynamics and relations create same-sex attraction, those with same-sex attractions are not responsible for their desires but only for the ways in which they may act on them.[12]

[11] Neither proponents nor critics of compassionate conservatism would dispute that at the heart of conservative compassion is the practice of drawing distinctions and making boundaries between categories of objects. Conservative compassion splits the object of political will and directs compassion toward one group and condemnation toward the other; for Christian conservatives, this means compassion toward people who resist their same-sex desires and condemnation toward people who embrace a gay or queer identity. Pedagogies and practices of boundaries of compassion raise the question of whether LGBT/queer people are in need of compassion. Indeed, many political theorists question whether compassion is an appropriate category of political thinking and motivation with regard to such citizens/subjects. This is a legitimate concern and one addressed by scholars who are concerned either with the condition of the public sphere or with the well-being of particular categories of citizens.[13] My goal here is neither to make the case that the Christian right emphasis on compassion is an appropriate deployment of political emotion nor to make a case for extirpating compassion from politics. Instead, it is to analyze the sexuality politics of the Christian right using Ayn Rand’s texts to articulate the terms of sexuality politics in gender, sexuality, and the boundaries of compassion.

Ayn Rand and the Conservative Context

[12] One testimony to Rand’s broad appeal at mid-century comes from author and contemporary Gore Vidal, who noted that when he campaigned unsuccessfully for a seat in the US House of Representatives in 1960 Rand “was the one writer people knew and talked about.” Vidal was startled to find Rand’s “philosophy” “nearly perfect in its immorality,” and he argued that this

reversal of traditional morality “makes the size of her audience all the more ominous and symptomatic as we enter a curious new phase in our society.”^[14] At the time of his brief comments on Rand, Vidal did not give specifics of the curious new phase, but other political authors fill in that gap and analyze the emergence of the contemporary conservative movement in the 1960s. In his discussion of the period of conservative “fusionism,” E.J. Dionne emphasizes the differences between Rand’s philosophy of “objectivism” and the conservatism of William F. Buckley and the *National Review*. It is not surprising that the most salient difference between Rand’s followers and the *National Review* revolved around the question of Christianity as a moral basis for conservatism.^[15] However, other reconstructions of the era suggest more complex and paradoxical ideological relationships than a simple cleavage between Rand’s objectivism and Buckley’s social conservatism allow.

[13] In her study of “the origins of the new American right” in California during the period, Lisa McGirr explicates the “distinct ideological strands” of right-wing ideas that cohered around the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. Prominent among these strands were Randian objectivism/libertarianism and social conservatism:

While these diverse strands of right wing thought differed at their logical philosophical endpoints, they shared a belief that the tendency toward liberal “collectivism” undermined older moral principles and what they perceived as fundamental truths.^[16]

Nor, despite the differences between the philosophies, were these similarities superficial. McGirr cites four areas of agreement that motivated “joint mobilization”: a distrust of the federal state; a commitment to well-defined authority (even if conceptions of authority differed between the sides); the equation of freedom with economic freedom; and the repudiation of “egalitarianism.”^[17]

[14] Jerome Tucille provides a more entertaining memoirist account of the Goldwater phenomenon that supplements McGirr’s history of conservative convergence. Tucille relates that Goldwater was understood by Rand’s followers as a “Randian character” who “belonged in Galt’s Gulch [the redoubt of superior characters in *Atlas Shrugged*]”—before his election defeat, “a hero straight from the pages of *Atlas Shrugged*.”^[18] In addition, Tucille complicates Dionne’s binary between Buckleyite social conservatism and Randian objectivism. Tucille notes the conflicting strands of conservatism at work in Buckley’s own thought and why many of Rand’s admirers—including himself—supported Buckley: “Buckley was bad, but the others were worse.”^[19] It is not necessary to deny divergences between the libertarian/market fundamentalist and social conservative strands of late twentieth century conservatism to recognize that their cooperation and likenesses have been a feature of the New Right since its inception.

[15] Admittedly, Rand is a strange thinker to link to Christian conservative ideas. As a novelist and self-styled philosopher of Objectivism, Rand extolled

reason, rejected religion as superstition, and created characters that exemplified—or caricatured—prototypes of reason and unreason as she understood them. Vidal concludes that Rand “declared war” on Christ and Christian morality.[20] Ethical and base, hard and soft, deserving and undeserving, Rand’s fictional heroes and antiheroes are didactic caricatures, or in a more generous vein, ideal types. They are certainly not Christians, and Rand’s own attitude toward Christianity would seem to foreclose productive comparisons between the two systems of belief. A provocative demurral on this point comes from some of Rand’s critics, including Tucille, who points out that Objectivist philosophy shares key characteristics with doctrinaire forms of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faith (as well as Marxist ideology). For young people from a “regimented, religious background,” Rand’s thought has provided a “dogmatic” and “closed system of ideas.” This system, Tucille argues, lets “you know everything is going to be all right forevermore. The world is intact and so are you. You’ve become a devout Objectivist.”[21]

[16] If Rand’s own rejection of religion is not dispositive on the issue of her usefulness as a guide to contemporary Christian right thought, there are two categories of linkage between the Christian right’s compassionate sexuality politics and Rand. The first is Rand’s conceptions of same-sex sexuality and gender, which she wrote into her fiction and philosophy, while the second—and even more productive—is a set of theoretical implications of ideas in her work that are not connected directly to sexuality.

Rand, Sex, and Gender

[17] Unlike the Christian right, Ayn Rand was libertarian with regard to legal proscriptions and prosecutions of same-sex sexuality. However, like the Christian right, she was harsh in her assessment of homosexuals, noting in her most public statement on the subject that homosexuality

involves psychological flaws, corruptions, errors, or unfortunate premises. ... Therefore I regard it as immoral ... And more than that, if you want my really sincere opinion. It’s disgusting.[22]

Although she did not express her views on the subject often, Rand’s perspective on same-sex sexuality has had a long life and occasioned a good deal of discussion and dissent among her followers and interlocutors. A key text in this debate is *Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, and Human Liberation*, by Chris Matthew Sciabarra, Rand’s most persistent academic expositor.

[18] In his brief monograph, originally published as essays in an Objectivist magazine, Sciabarra surveys past and present Objectivists on the subject of Rand’s and her movement’s orientation toward same-sex sexuality.[23] What he finds is that the history of Objectivism has been marked by bias against lesbians and gay men, in the name of the founder’s own beliefs and of the morality and rationality she championed. Using the narratives of respondents and his own interpretation of Objectivist philosophy, Sciabarra denounces this bias. He argues that human liberation can be achieved through adherence to the

precepts of Rand's philosophy when those precepts diverge from Rand's own flawed judgment and taste. Even though respondents attest that antigay bias in the movement has diminished since the 1960s and 1970s, not everyone is persuaded that the shift toward greater tolerance is consistent with Objectivist thought. So, for example, Reginald Firehammer's *The Hijacking of a Philosophy: Homosexuals vs. Ayn Rand's Objectivism* is a response to Sciabarra and a putative "homosexual agenda" within the ideological precincts of Objectivism.[24] This disagreement over the correct Objectivist position on same-sex sexuality is plainly a struggle over Rand's legacy. Still, assuming that pure reason does not dictate antigay morality, the struggle helps to clarify the continuing relevance of antigay social conservatism among Rand's admirers.

[19] Rand did not arrive at her conclusions by way of religious belief, yet there are deep similarities between her understanding of same-sex sexuality and the in-group positions now expounded by the Christian right. There was a time when Rand's view that same-sex sexuality could be summed up by noting its immorality, the psychological problems of its practitioners, and the natural disgust of heterosexuals was common in both in-group and public discourse of the conservative Christian movement. However, as the movement has become both more politically sophisticated and more integrated into governing institutions, a bifurcation of discourse has become increasingly common. Beginning in the 1990s, Christian right leaders have directed this kind of "abomination" rhetoric to conservative Christian in-groups while directing more compassionate and democratic rhetoric to both in-group and public audiences.[25] When it works effectively, this message segmentation mobilizes supporters, pacifies potential adversaries, and provides crucial forms of moral, theological, and political instruction to Christian conservatives.

[20] With regard to homosexuality and disgust, even Christian right literature on same-sex sexuality that is produced with the highest production values and is meant to showcase the inclusion of social science reveals disgust in its glossy pages. So, for example, the Family Research Council produces a brochure, entitled "The Slippery Slope of Same-Sex Marriage," that reports the popular survey research on "strong negative reactions" to same-sex sexual behaviour:

This "ick factor," far from irrational, is rooted in the subconscious realization of what is normal and what is not, and which forms an inescapable part of our being. And it may be that by underestimating the power of this innate understanding, gay activists have made their greatest tactical error.[26]

Traditionalist disgust is palpable in much of the literature associated with the Christian right, but so is earnest pedagogy that appeals to Christians to examine their own disgust and to try to overcome it for ministerial purposes. One recent example of this literature is Brian Keith Williams' *Ministering Graciously to the Gay and Lesbian Community: Pouring in the Oil and the Wine*. Williams uses a variety of emotion words to describe same-sex sexuality as an object, the feelings about same-sex sexuality of other conservative Christians and those he has confronted in himself: detest, repulsed, repugnant, repulsive, disgusting,

disdain, horror, infested, and ghastly.[27] The fluency of these verbs and adjectives suggests the author's position that what inspires disgust and revulsion, is, in fact, objectively repulsive and ghastly. The task at hand, a specifically compassionate calling, is to transform these quite natural responses into a stance that is informed by God's charge to minister to those in need of salvation and repentance.

[21] In addition to the congruence between her views and those of the Christian right on same-sex sexuality, Rand's gender essentialism and gender complementarity are also closer to those on the Christian right than we might think given her stance against religious belief. It is clear from Rand's writings and the memoirs of her companions that Rand's views of same-sex sexuality were closely linked with her conception of gender, and especially of gender complementarity. If Rand's perspective on gender as a binary system is not obvious enough in her novels, her close companions testify to this aspect of her thought and autobiography.[28]

[22] A prominent detail of Rand's personal conception of gender difference often has been the subject of discussion in her work: her belief that by nature a heroic woman seeks to submit herself to a suitably heroic man. In Rand's masterpiece, *Atlas Shrugged*, the female protagonist, Dagny Taggart, ultimately falls in love with John Galt, whose superiority over the novel's other heroic males is legible even to the least discerning readers. However, the passage in Rand's fiction that is most revealing and controversial on this point is the scene in her 1943 novel, *The Fountainhead*, in which the male protagonist, Howard Roark, rapes the female protagonist, Dominique Françon, a scene that has inspired a prodigious amount of commentary on Rand's work.[29] Rand herself famously referred to the scene as a "rape by engraved invitation," instructing readers that unspoken consent underlies the encounter.[30]

[23] Christian right narratives of same-sex sexual development are grounded in consistent binary conceptions of feminine and masculine gender. These conceptions are taught and modeled by ex-gay and lesbian spokespersons in the ex-gay movement, who are taught during their own struggles against homosexuality that a damaged gender identity lies at the root of same-sex desire.[31] More troubling to ex-gay movement critics and skeptics is way in which the movement is concerned with monitoring and adjusting the gender expression and proclivities of children. An early work in this genre provides checklists of inappropriate gender characteristics to help parents identify "children who are beginning to show signs or trends of future homosexual development." [32] But the concern with children's "prehomosexuality" as indicated by gender deviance remains today in the words and work of, for example, James Dobson, child psychologist and founder of Focus on the Family.[33]

[24] Christian conservative women write frequently on the issue of submission, a concept they argue is often misconstrued by those who do not share their traditionalist faith. Beverly LaHaye speaks for many when she writes that

Biblical teaching on women's submission is that women are "subordinate, but not inferior." Hence, for LaHaye, popular meanings of submission that suggest inferiority or slavishness are not appropriate and demean women.^[34] Of course, for Christian conservative women, the requirement of submission is grounded in Biblical admonitions concerned women's relations to their husbands and women's role in public life. Not so for Rand, who regarded the feminine desire for submission to be physiologically and "psycho-epistemologically" scripted. Her lover and first protégé, the psychologist Nathaniel Branden, summarized her view in this way: "While a healthy aggressiveness and self-assertiveness is proper and desirable for both sexes, man experiences the essence of his masculinity in the act of romantic dominance; woman experiences the essence of her femininity in the act of romantic submission."^[35]

[25] The key distinction between the forms of submission that Rand repudiates throughout her work and the form she valorizes between the men and women who exemplify her ideal of heroism is that the latter is freely chosen rather than a result of manipulation, false consciousness, or convention. Indeed, gendered submission is a marker of the individualism Rand celebrates. For Christian conservative women, gendered submission is freely chosen as well—a marker of a Christian woman's relationship with God and a celebration of womanhood rather than the sign of an abject identity.

[26] The particulars of gender scripts and female submission in Rand's work and in the ideology of the Christian right vary considerably. I am not suggesting that gender conceptions are the same in these quite different modes of thought but, rather, that the structure in which gender is thought is similar enough to allow observers to abstract from the differences. Both Rand and the Christian right understand gender as a binary system and one that upholds women's value at the same time that it scripts natural submission to men in intimate relations. This binary system of gender in turn underwrites the abjection of same-sex sexuality as unnatural and morally grotesque.

[27] Writing in an organ of the Objectivist movement, one admirer asks the question: should Ayn Rand have been a feminist? He answers: "While her own account of sexuality is in many ways quite traditional (and thus anti-feminist), her individualist ethics suggests an anti-traditional resolution to the questions of sex."^[36] Rand's conceptions of gender and sexuality are certainly anti-traditional in many important respects. But it is the common ground they share with traditional views that suggests ways in which they can underwrite other forms of individualism (and conservatism) than those Rand would have associated with her thought.

Objectiv(ist) Compassion

[28] It is not necessary, however, to rely on autobiographical details to make Rand a useful resource for Christian right thinking about compassion. Turning from Rand's personal views on same-sex sexuality back to her work and ideas, she provides provocative resources for thinking critically about the Christian

right's deployment of compassion. In what follows, I will discuss two key similarities between Rand's pedagogy and that of the Christian right: both emphasize the value of compassion and both demarcate the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate compassion.

The Value of Compassion

[29] Because of the emphasis she places on individual striving in her fiction, Rand likely is read by many to scorn the tender emotion and helping hand of compassion altogether.[37] And, indeed, Rand invites this reading through her explicit critique of liberal compassion.

If anyone ever believed (or tried to believe) that the motive of altruism is compassion, that its goal is the relief of human suffering and the elimination of poverty, the state of today's culture now deprives him of any foothold on self-deception. Today, altruism is running amuck, shedding its tattered rationalizations and displaying its soul.[38]

But this interpretation of Rand as anti-compassion would ignore the explicit treatment she gives the subject in her work. For Rand, compassion can be immoral, but only when it is extended to the undeserving. Rand's novels attest to the interest of her heroes in extending compassion to their worthy fellows.

[30] Compassion is positive under two conditions: that the individuals who extend compassion do so willingly and not as a matter of compulsion and that those who are recipients of compassion are deserving by the standard of morality Rand elaborates—a standard she claims is objective and universal. For Rand, as for compassionate conservatives, liberalism fails as a governing philosophy for three reasons. First, liberalism subjects citizens to compulsory giving through taxation and various redistributive schemes. Second, liberalism sanctions the expenditure of inappropriate compassion on undeserving objects. And third, liberalism incites or tolerates the leveling of rage and *ressentiment* at deserving objects, especially those who exemplify individualism and produce society's goods.[39]

[31] The Christian right's compassion campaigns are not new, but the recent emphasis on compassion, both inside the movement and in its relations with the broad public, represents a changed approach to sexuality politics. Critics, including many LGBT activists, understand this shift from more punitive discourse about same-sex sexuality as softened rhetoric that merely masks a more devious political agenda. For these critics, the phrase, "calculated compassion" describes both the public face of the Christian right and its strategic mode of selling itself to the mainstream public.[40] The movement's compassion campaigns are undeniably strategic, intended as they are to buttress widespread support for denying queer people freedom from stigma and access to rights and public goods. However, these campaigns are not strategic without remainder, or at least they do not only exist to mystify the real aims of conservative Christian morality politics.

[32] The emphasis on compassion is not only fabricated for, and broadcast to, the mainstream public in order to shape public opinion about the movement and its ends. It is also an integral part of pedagogy within the movement and helps to shape the consciousness and practices—and not only the public rhetoric—of movement insiders. The developmental literature provides a case in point of the importance of compassion in motivating conservative Christians to engage with, and minister to, people who “struggle” with same-sex desire. In this literature—and in ministries associated with therapeutic approaches to “strugglers”—authors call on Christian compassion, using stories such as the “good Samaritan” to teach Christian conservatives how to treat people who suffer against their will from homosexual desires as wounded people rather than as demonic enemies.[41] From the perspective of those outside the Christian right movement, such a conception of compassion is not ideal, but vigorous disagreement between political adversaries about the nature and meaning of compassion does not obviate the possibility that activists on both sides are motivated by some version of compassion whose terms must then be exposed and analyzed.

[33] Rand’s perspective on compassion runs through her fiction and non-fiction. Indeed, one fruitful way to read Rand’s work is as a set of guidelines about the appropriate moral grounds for compassion, including the conditions under which compassion emerges among the characters in her fiction.

The Boundary of Compassion

[34] Rand works out the theme of compassion in *Atlas Shrugged*. Never a subtle story-teller, Rand expounds her account of desert and the mind of those who speak for undeserved compassion in a chapter entitled, “Anti-Life.”[42] As always, she subordinates plot and character to didactic commentary; the chapter itself consists of a series of confrontations that clarify the values that underlie the story and move the novel toward its denouement. Dagny Taggart reaches out to her desperate sister-in-law who has just realized the collectivist evil being perpetrated by those closest to her: “I feel terribly sorry for you, Cheryl, and I’d like to help you—not because you suffer, but because you haven’t deserved to suffer.” Later, Dagny experiencing a foreboding spasm of concern, invites Cheryl to spend the night with her instead of returning home to Dagny’s degenerate brother. Cheryl declines, and at the conclusion of the chapter, Dagny’s anxiety about Cheryl’s fate is vindicated: Cheryl plunges to her death, driven to suicide by her fresh and uncontainable knowledge of good and evil.[43]

[35] As the novel progresses toward its climax, a sentimental scene unfolds that reminds readers of the conditions under which it is morally acceptable for compassion to come into existence. The U.S. government is moving to appropriate the productive apparatus of the novel’s protagonists, and a young man that Dagny’s lover, Hank Rearden, has dubbed “the Wet Nurse” defies the looters and is shot as he flees to warn Rearden about their designs. As the Wet Nurse lies dying from a chest wound, Rearden hears his story, which includes

an oddly religious tableau: a lengthy confession of previous ideological error and the Wet Nurse's repentance. Rearden responds to this change of mind by humanizing the young man—calling him by his real name for the first time—cradling him, and tenderly kissing him on the forehead. Throughout the novels, Rand has heroic characters to whom compassion is extended express concern that they are being presumptuous so that she can define the terms by which compassion is (now) deserved. So it is with Tony/the Wet Nurse:

[36] The boy's head dropped on Rearden's shoulder, hesitantly, almost as if this were a presumption. Rearden bent down and pressed his lips to the dust-streaked forehead.

The boy jerked back, raising his head with a shock of incredulous, indignant astonishment. "Do you know what you did?" he whispered, as if unable to believe that it was meant for him.

"Put your head down," said Rearden, "and I'll do it again."^[44]

For Rand, appropriate compassion emerges between hero-protagonists because they embrace a common morality/ideology. She stages compassion for the reader by reminding the reader of its terms. When Cherryl Taggart says to Dagny, "That I happen to suffer doesn't give me a claim on you," Dagny responds predictably: "No, it doesn't. But that you value all the things I value, does."^[45]

[37] As a political movement, the Christian right draws a bright line between those who are objects of legitimate concern as fellow persons and citizens and those who are not. By contrast with distinctions of status and behaviour that often provide a framework for the treatment of LGBT/queer people, the Christian right's compassion campaigns make ideological distinctions based upon the beliefs/convictions of potential objects of compassion. Proper objects of compassion believe that what they want to do or have done is morally wrong, and they commit themselves to a slate of convictions that is consistent with conservative Christian theology. This is not to say that behaviour is unimportant to Christian conservatives who police the boundaries of sexuality, but it is to say that behaviour is not the most important standard. The priority of ideology over identity becomes most clear when we focus attention on those designated as undeserving. Conservative Christians who are involved with the ex-gay movement understand that same-sex attracted people in the movement may have engaged in homosexual behaviour and may even continue to experience sexual "falls" while struggling with same-sex desire. Tanya Erzen documents this dynamic of struggle in her ethnographic study of New Hope Ministry, the oldest residential ex-gay ministry in the US. Erzen finds that sexual "brokenness" and falls serve the pedagogical purpose of reinforcing the wonder of God's grace and the distance between sinfulness and obedience, as well as providing a more interesting public witness.^[46]

[38] What is intriguing about the ex-gay movement, and particularly about the way it is often understood by many outside critics, is that in spite of the emphasis on change of sexual orientation, there is wide latitude within the

movement for the tenaciousness of same-sex desire and for the substitution of a right relationship with Jesus Christ for a transformation of proscribed sexual desires. This is true of both Catholic and Protestant arms of the movement. The Catholic ex-gay project, *Courage*, emphasizes celibacy in the presence of what is assumed will be continuing same-sex desire, while Protestant projects emphasize the hope for transformation of these desires into normative heterosexuality. But both—whether publicly or in the private precincts of the movement—acknowledge that the positioning of individuals within the boundaries of compassion is conditioned neither on the absence of same-sex desire nor on the absence of even sexual acting out. Rather, it is a matter of conviction and testimony—of being willing to attest to a moral system in which same-sex sexuality is morally unacceptable.

[39] As valuable as compassion is to the therapeutic and political projects of the Christian right, it does not extend to those who refuse to renounce their same-sex attractions or who embrace a public identity as lesbian, gay or queer. If the ex-gay movement directs compassion toward strugglers, particular segments of the movement target unregenerate queers for political intervention. Political pedagogy often begins with the claim that Christian and homosexual identities are mutually exclusive. This pedagogy repudiates the existence of queer Christians and reinforces the central split—moral/immoral, Godly/unGodly, good/evil—that runs through the politics of the Christian right. Once lesbians and gay men are located outside the Christian community, conservative Christian followers receive political instruction that assumes and reinforces the undeserving status of queers. In this pedagogy, there are no happy homosexuals or satisfying same-sex relationships.

[40] As many observers of the ex-gay movement point out, accounts of homosexual disease and misery constitute a mendacious baseline of information that the movement delivers to those who struggle to transform their sexual desires.[47] Those whose behaviour and rights claims constitute an assault on morality, the family, and the polity cannot be tolerated without violating basic precepts of God's design. Same-sex attracted women and men who renounce their desires and commit themselves to conversion and abstinence from same-sex sexuality are proper objects of compassion, same-sex-attracted people who claim an LGBT/queer identity are outside the boundary of appropriate compassion.[48] The repudiation of compassion for the suffering of unrepentant queers is rehearsed explicitly in the political pedagogy of the Christian right movement. The split between compassion and chastening is especially evident in such projects as Focus on the Family's Love Won Out conferences, which alternate compassion for strugglers with information and instruction that encourages participants to pursue antigay politics.

[41] With regard to the deserving and the undeserving, Rand is every bit as convinced and, to her many admirers, convincing as those who advocate for conservative Christian sexuality politics. Rand distinguishes between "hatred of the good for being the good"—"the naked face of evil"—and its alternative when she writes:

Do not confuse this response with that of a person who resents someone's unearned success, or feels pleased by someone's deserved failure. These responses are caused by a sense of justice, which is an entirely different phenomenon, and its emotional manifestations are different: in such cases, a person expresses indignation, not hatred—or relief, not malicious gloating.[49]

That there are discrete differences between Rand's and the Christian right's conceptions of justice and dessert should not erase the structural similarities that dictate the terms of compassion and, indeed, respect for fellow citizens.

Conclusion

[42] It is appropriate to focus on compassion discourse as a matter of fixing boundaries, because making the distinctions essential to good boundaries is key to understanding the very meaning of compassion. In fact, the Christian right fixes boundaries in two senses of that term: fixing in the sense of setting, or determining, and fixing in the sense of repairing moral boundaries from the damages wrought by liberalism. Whatever their differences, moral rhetorics—including about compassion—have in common that they are boundary projects of one kind or another. Seen in this light, the boundary projects of Christian right and liberal compassion could not be more different. Christian right compassion, like the compassionate conservatism with which it shares some features, is a boundary-building project.[50] Compassion campaigns are constructed not only as good public relations, as many critics suppose, but also—and crucially—to instruct movement followers in the moral codes and political practices that ought to accompany the dispensing of compassion.

[43] When examining the compassion campaigns of the Christian right on issues of sexuality, the first question to be answered is not whether queers need particular compassion. A more useful question is how compassion that might be targeted to those who are treated with indignity and/or political oppressed is routed away from queers through the use of narratives of deserved queer suffering, queer miserable individuality, queer subversion of Godly normality, and/or the good and appropriate disgust that queer identity and sexuality inspire in others. These narratives protect traditional believers by vividly contrasting them with the aggressively unredeemed and unregenerate. They endorse a strict moral code that justifies punishment for those who transgress sexual dictates set by traditionalist belief. They shore up defenses against the possibility of guilt and identification. Unfortunately, they also help to justify a range of public policies that define those others as second-class citizens and as a threat to a Christian nation.

[44] Christian right theological politics function like Ayn Rand's didactic fiction: both discourses constitute believers into a shared belief system. Ayn Rand and the philosophy she created are not associated with religion and traditional moral beliefs, but such a narrow focus obscures the centrality in her system of clear moral distinctions, many of which mirror and reinforce those found in conservative Christian doctrine. Like Christian right elites, Rand

divided the world sharply into good and evil and taught her disciples about the nature of appropriate compassion and just deserts.

Notes

[1] See Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1995).

[2] Lauren Berlant, "Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)," in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant, (New York, Routledge, 2004), 5.

[3] Linda Kintz does not mention Rand in her genealogy of right-wing thought, but this is an odd omission. This is especially so in that Kintz stresses the theme of victimization that runs through entrepreneurial and "frontier ideology" and the belief that entrepreneurs receive little in comparison to their contributions to human welfare. Both are favorite themes of Rand's in fiction and non-fiction. See Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market*, 192-97.

[4] Cynthia Burack, *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). For an analysis of conservative Christianity and its relation to pop culture see especially Chapter 2, "The Nightmare of Homosexuality," on Chick tracts.

[5] Bruce Headlam, "Forget Joyce, Bring on Ayn Rand," (*New York Times*, 1998) http://tech2.nytimes.com/mem/technology/techreview.html?_r=1&res=9B01E5DC1738F933A05754C0A96E958260&oref=login (accessed February 2, 2007). In the Modern Library poll, *Anthem* and *We the Living* came in at numbers seven and eight, respectively.

[6] This description appears on the back cover of editions of *Atlas Shrugged* and in much copy about the novel.

[7] For accounts by many Objectivist adherents of social conservatism within the movement, see Chris Matthew Sciabarra, *Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, and Human Liberation* (Cape Town, South Africa: Leap Publishing, 2003).

[8] Harriet Rubin. "Ayn Rand's Literature of Capitalism." *The New York Times* (September 15, 2007) <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/15/business/15atlas.html?ei=5087%0A&em=&en=c6fc1c1b0f70b13a&ex=1190174400&pagewanted=print> (accessed September 17, 2007).

[9] Berlant, "Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)," 4.

[10] For Christian pop culture, see Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[11] One example of reparative therapy in the Objectivist movement is the

work of psychologist Nathaniel Branden. See Chris Matthew Sciabarra, (Cape Town, South Africa: Leap Publishing, 2003), 11-12.

[12] See Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson. "Origin Stories: Same-Sex Sexuality and Christian Right Politics," *Culture and Religion* 6, 3 (2005): 369-392.

[13] The theorist who is most often associated with these concerns is Hannah Arendt. See, for example, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

[14] Gore Vidal, "Two Immoralists: Orville Prescott and Ayn Rand, in *Rocking the Boat* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 232-34.

[15] E.J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004), 264-65.

[16] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 152.

[17] McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 164-65.

[18] Jerome Tucille, *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand. 25th Anniversary Edition* (San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1997), 29; 32.

[19] Tucille, *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*, 44.

[20] Vidal, "Two Immoralists," 233.

[21] Tucille, *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*, 4-7.

[22] Rand made her comments after a speech at Northeastern University in 1971. See Paul Varnell, "Ayn Rand and Homosexuality" (Independent Gay Forum, 2003) <http://www.indegayforum.org/news/show/27018.html> (accessed January 23, 2007).

[23] Sciabarra, *Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, and Human Liberation*. For an alternative reading that is critical of Sciabarra, see Reginald Firehammer, *The Hijacking of a Philosophy: Homosexuals vs. Ayn Rand's Objectivism* (BookSurge Publishing, 2004).

[24] Reginald Firehammer, *The Hijacking of a Philosophy: Homosexuals vs. Ayn Rand's Objectivism* (BookSurge Publishing, 2004).

[25] See Burack, *Sin, Sex, and Democracy*.

[26] Timothy J. Dailey, "The Slippery Slope of Same-Sex Marriage," *Family Research Council* (Washington, DC: Family Research Council, 2004).

[27] Brian Keith Willams, *Ministering Graciously to the Gay and Lesbian Community: Pouring in the Oil and the Wine* (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: Destiny Image Publishers, 2005).

[28] See Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (New York: Anchor, 1987).

[29] See *The Fountainhead*, Part 2, Chapter 1. Both feminist critics and admirers of Rand are drawn to the rape scene, as essays in this volume demonstrate: Mimi Reisel Gladstein and Chris Matthew Sciabarra, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1999). And the scene continues to entice commentators outside academia; a parody treatment can be found in Robert Lee, *The Fountainhead*, Starring Skullforce,” (undated) <http://jeffcomp.com/faq/parody/> (accessed February 5, 2007). In it, Francon says to Roark, “Hello. To prove how far above the masses we are, would you like to break into my house tonight and rape me?”

[30] Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 134. Rand’s second, and final, “intellectual heir,” Leonard Peikoff, describes Rand’s view of love between two men in this way: “this relationship, she holds, can exist between two men who are both healthy; it would not include sex—because, she thought, they won’t have the desire for that form of expression of their love.” Leonard Peikoff, “An Interview with Leonard Peikoff from Essay on Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*” (Leonard Peikoff: Philosopher of Objectivism, 2006). <http://www.peikoff.com/fountainhead.htm> (accessed February 18, 2007).

[31] For a recent example, see Joseph Nicolosi and Linda Ames Nicolosi, *A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002). The theme of damaged gender identity is so ubiquitous in the ex-gay and reparative therapies literatures that virtually any examples of the genre could be used as examples.

[32] See Frank M. du Mas, *Gay is Not Good* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979).

[33] See James Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys: Practical Advice and Encouragement for Those Shaping the Next Generation of Men* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), p. 123.

[34] Beverly LaHaye, *I am a Woman by God’s Design* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1980). See also Tim LaHaye and Beverly LaHaye, *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978).

[35] Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem: A New Concept of Man’s Psychological Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1971).

[36] Bryan Register. “Should Ayn Rand Have Been a Feminist?” (The Atlas Society and Its Objectivist Center, 2005) <http://www.objectivistcenter.org/showcontent.aspx?ct=139&h=53> (accessed February 6, 2007).

[37] One set of writings on Rand and compassion, although it is sympathetic to

Rand, constitutes a kind of defense of compassion against Rand's repudiation of altruism. See W. Teed Rockwell, "Altruism, Pity and Compassion: Significant (and Ignored) Differences," *Truth Seeker* 120, 2 (1993): 10-5; W. Teed Rockwell. "Altruism, Pity and Compassion: Significant (and Ignored) Differences. Part Two—Compassion," *Truth Seeker* 120, 3 (1993): 4-9. In staking out his position, Rockwell seems unaware of the role of compassion in Rand's thought.

[38] Ayn Rand, "Return of the Primitive," p. 139.

[39] These arguments are found throughout Rand's massive canon. See, for example, Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Random House, 1961). In this text, Rand lays out some basics of her worldview in an essay entitled, "For the New Intellectual," and then abstracts passages from her novels to define a variety of terms and to make didactic points.

[40] See Surina Khan, "Calculated Compassion: How the Ex-Gay Movement Serves the Right's Attack on Democracy," (Public Eye, 1998), <http://www.publiceye.org/equality/x-gay/X-Gay.htm> (accessed November 6, 2001).

[41] The parable of the Good Samaritan appears in Luke 10:25-37.

[42] "Anti-Life" is Chapter IV in Part 3 of *Atlas Shrugged*.

[43] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1957), 824-28; 842-43.

[44] Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 921-22.

[45] Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 825.

[46] Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[47] See A. Lee Beckstead, "Cures versus Choices: Agendas in Sexual Reorientation Therapy," in *Sexual Conversion Therapy: Ethical, Clinical and Research Perspectives*, eds. Ariel Shidlo, Michael Schroeder, and Jack Drescher, 87-115 (New York, Haworth Medical Press, 2001).

[48] Christian right literature on homosexuality often employs the shorthand abbreviations, SSA women and SSA men.

[49] Rand, "The Age of Envy," 132.

[50] See Angelia Wilson's account of "conditional love" in Angelia R. Wilson, *Below the Belt: Sexuality, Religion and the American South* (London: Cassell, 2000).