

# Compassion Campaigns and Antigay Politics: What Would Arendt Do?

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**Abstract:** Compassionate conservatism is usually dismissed on the American political left as an empty slogan intended to mystify the real roots and aspirations of conservative politics. However, conservative Christian organizations and churches now conduct well-coordinated compassion campaigns on contested social issues such as sexual and reproductive rights. Through compassion campaigns, the Christian right also disseminates particular forms of political pedagogy regarding sexuality and compassion for followers who are subject to the movement's influence. Here, I turn to Hannah Arendt to analyze the politics of compassion at work in the ex-gay movement and in antiabortion projects such as Silent No More. This article presents evidence for a turn to compassionate pedagogies on the Christian right, analyzes these projects, and suggests ways that Arendt's political thought can inform our readings of conservative Christian compassionate discourse and political practices.

## COMPASSION CAMPAIGNS

Over the last 15 years, the Christian right has matured as a social and political movement, and its compassionate pedagogies on contested moral/cultural issues such as sexual and reproductive rights are one manifestation of that maturation. In some of its ideology and activism on sexuality, the Christian right has added softened rhetoric and a variety of

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compassionate projects to its more familiar repertoire of moralistic public rhetoric and punitive policy recommendations (Burlein 2002). With regard to the Christian right's agenda on minority sexuality, many advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) people hold fast to the view that conservative Christian compassion is a political strategy rather than an authentic orientation. It makes sense that queer people, their allies, and those in the reproductive rights community should believe this. The compassion of the Christian right is still antigay and is deployed against abortion rights; indeed, it would be legitimate to modify the compassion with which I am concerned and refer to it consistently as "antigay (or antiabortion) compassion" to distinguish it from other forms of compassion that do not share its provenance and aspirations.

Believing that the antigay and antiabortion stances of the Christian right cause harm to those who are their objects, activist critics of the Christian right often conclude that harm and compassion are mutually exclusive or even that the movement is motivated by hatred of gays and of women who refuse normative standards of womanhood and motherhood. In this reading, compassion campaigns mask hostility toward their objects, and no more extensive inquiry into their deployment is warranted. However, if compassion campaigns were merely a public relations ploy, we might expect to encounter compassion discourse only or virtually only in public settings and media — contexts in which movement leaders communicate the movement's goals and principles to those outside the in-group and act to secure political goods such as laws and court decisions. The Christian right movement does engage in compassionate discourse and projects that are directed toward a mainstream audience, but the movement is also rife with compassion discourse directed toward in-group members in venues and media in which Christian conservative believers are primary consumers. Christian right leaders produce and distribute a quite different narrative of homosexual abomination and direct it toward those same group members, but the significant volume of compassion pedagogy — and its reception by Christian conservatives — suggests that compassion is more than a deception by which the Christian right attempts to recuperate and maintain its reputation with those outside the movement.

Compassionate campaigns in the areas of sexuality share some characteristics: they seem to conflict with other approaches to these cultural issues that are more harsh in tone and punitive toward their objects, and they include careful instruction to followers about political processes

related to the issue area. Besides the general forms of political pedagogy associated with them, there are important differences of substance that reflect the distinctions between arenas of same-sex sexuality and abortion.

The ex-gay movement, the principal arena for compassion campaigns in the area of gay rights, 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 and to mitigate blame toward those afflicted with such desires (Burack 2008b, 76–87; Burack and Josephson 2005). In the area of abortion politics, general-purpose groups, single-issue organizations, and megachurches have launched a number of initiatives that distance critics of abortion rights from murder rhetoric, focus on the well-being of women, and approach the issue of abortion from a self-consciously compassionate perspective (Green 2002, 129–30). These include the Silent No More Awareness Campaign, to which I return later, and Focus on the Family's Think About It project. Think About It uses language that suggests Lifetime rather than Pro-Life: "it's about women/ it's about choice/ it's about truth/ it's about us/ it's about connection." In their emphasis on choice, relationships, and consciousness-raising many anti-abortion compassion campaigns seem more like grassroots feminist projects than like the punitive right-wing projects with which they share a political genealogy.<sup>1</sup> In addition to their compassionate rhetoric, many provide resources and therapeutic services to target populations: pregnant women and those who have had abortions, and people who experience unwanted same-sex attraction.

It is my intention to take Christian right compassion seriously. This is to say that if compassion campaigns are only manifestations of public relations — a political strategy cloaking brass-knuckled discriminatory politics — then the following analysis has little purchase on our current situation. If, on the other hand, there is more to Christian conservative compassion than mendacity and the manipulation of public sentiments, it will be fruitful to examine these campaigns carefully to discern their political and pedagogical effects. In spite of their differences, considering antigay and antiabortion compassion campaigns together clarifies how compassion is set to work in the contemporary cultural politics of the Christian conservative movement.

In this article, I use the political theory of Hannah Arendt to examine Christian right compassion campaigns. Arendt's opposition to compassion as a mode and motivation of politics is well known. Indeed, Arendt articulated her critique of the role of compassion in political

life so incisively and generously throughout her writings that any examination of the subject would do well to grapple with her arguments. If the Christian right's contemporary sexuality politics are motivated by compassion in some form, it seems likely that Arendt's critique might provide students of the movement with some purchase on its compassion campaigns. Such an analysis might even facilitate a counter-critique of Arendt, vindicating a political approach that focuses on compassion for the abjected others whose personhood is diminished by their participation in homosexuality or abortion.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I discuss compassion from Arendt's perspective, highlighting her worries about the antipolitical effects of action driven by compassion. Using Arendt's analysis, I argue that the features of compassion that undergird Arendt's critique and motivate her concerns about compassion are not present in Christian right compassion campaigns and that as a result, her critique is less applicable to the Christian right than it might appear to be. However, other dimensions of Arendt's thought can help students of the movement to analyze the structure, purposes, and possible effects of Christian conservative compassion.

### **CAUTION: HAZARDOUS COMPASSION AHEAD**

Taking into account her pitiless repudiation of compassionate politics, as well as other aspects of her thought, many students of Arendt have criticized "her philosophy of political heartlessness" (Nelson 2004, 234). George Kateb puts Arendt's view starkly: "the goodness of Jesus destroys the world; the morality of love destroys the world (1984, 89)." Arendt's germinal consideration of the role of compassion in politics is found in *On Revolution*, her study of "the principles which underlie all revolutions (1990)."<sup>3</sup> There, she defines compassion: "to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious" and points out that compassion consists in "co-suffering" with "one person" — not a group or class. Thus, it is in the very definition of compassion that it is inconsistent with politics — a mass enterprise even when executed by individuals acting on a public stage. Compassion is characterized by "awkwardness with words," by which she means not maladroitness with language but speechlessness in the face of suffering (85).

Arendt identifies the "passion of compassion" with the French Revolution rather than with the American. But this distinction is not entirely salutary for the Americans. Pointing out that "it is by no means a

matter of course for the spectacle of misery to move men to pity,” Arendt begins her consideration of compassion with a constructivist account of the importing of compassion into the political sphere and a brief account of how American slaves were excluded from the sentiment of compassion by their free white revolutionary contemporaries. Arendt lauds one end result of this exclusion — a revolution that wasn’t driven by compassion for “sheer misery” — even as she conceptualizes a more appropriate and less destructive rationale for opposition to slavery than compassion:

if Jefferson, and others to a lesser degree, were aware of the primordial crime upon which the fabric of American society rested, if they “trembled when [they] thought that God is just” (Jefferson), they did so because they were convinced of the incompatibility of the institution of slavery with the foundation of freedom, not because they were moved by pity or by a feeling of solidarity with their fellow men (70–72).

Arendt uncovers a superior justification for revolution than compassion, explaining that even in circumstances that would more than warrant the sentiment of compassion, it is better for the polity for other — political, rather than social — reasons and motivations to prevail.

Students of Arendt’s thought have given a good deal of consideration to her critique of compassion and its close cousin, pity. Kateb points out that for Arendt, compassion and pity are not the same (although she sometimes seems to conflate the two); pity is compassion perverted by its appearance in the public sphere. Pity results when people are called upon to feel compassion for the “suffering masses” rather than participating in relations with concrete suffering others (1984, 93). Kathleen B. Jones agrees: “the problem with compassion for Arendt is that it soon deteriorates into pity; as such it is unable to distinguish among the masses and can only comprehend suffering in its sheer numbers” (1993, 170). It is also fruitful to think about the connection Arendt made between compassion and goodness, “related phenomena” although “they are not the same” (1990, 83). A problem with compassion as a source of political action is that it is associated with the attempt of political actors to use political and other means to impose a particular conception of goodness on the world.

In spite of its connection with goodness and absolute morality, compassion — or its pernicious cousin, pity — can quickly descend into rage and then to violence. Drawing on Aristotle, Arendt argues that emotions such as rage can be rational or irrational, depending upon their context. Rage is natural in some circumstances, but it is not an

ineluctable result of misery so much as it is a response to the disjunction between misery and the foreclosed possibility of amelioration. However, Arendt adds that the “history of revolution” also demonstrates the role that compassionate “members of the upper classes” have in inciting the rage of the “oppressed and downtrodden” and in leading the rebellions that follow (1970, 63–65). This course of events — compassion for the miserable leading to pity and from there to rage and rebellion — clarifies the relationship Arendt posits between compassion and violence. It also clarifies the close relationship she finds between violence and the fascination with goodness that underwrites compassionate approaches to politics.

Arendt’s critique of compassion in politics is no extraneous concern but is, rather, deeply embedded in, and often logically related to, core dimensions of her political thought. Throughout her work, she identifies a number of problems with the deployment of compassion in and as politics, all of which reinforce the untrustworthiness of compassion as a kind of *political* emotion. Many of these concerns emerge in some form in her extended analysis of the subject in *On Revolution* (1990, 60–85). There, Arendt lays out four political vices of compassionate politics. First, “pity . . . undermines solidarity” — a commitment to ideas and interests rather than to undifferentiated group identity or human neediness (Jones 1993, 171). Second, to the extent that the conception of goodness upon which compassion is based is derived from a form of absolute morality, compassion often debases politics by turning it into a tool for the imposition of a particular version of goodness. A third, and closely related issue, is that the imposition of compassion driven by absolute morality easily leads to violence; Arendt’s case, of course, is the terror that followed the French Revolution.

Fourth, Arendt argues that compassion isn’t a “natural” emotion that responds ineluctably to misery; rather, compassion selects its objects with great flexibility. Our compassion is guided by our own identifications and sentiments and excludes some even as it recognizes and validates the suffering of others. Here, the failure of the American founders to recognize the suffering of slaves as a condition that provokes compassion is both a laudable sign of the politics of the American Revolution and a demonstration of the untrustworthiness of compassion. This concern with the unavoidable partiality of compassion or, rather, with the partiality of those who would use compassion to ground their political sentiments and action is clear in Arendt’s public correspondence with Gershom Scholem after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.<sup>4</sup> When Scholem read passages in *Eichmann* as demonstrating that Arendt

lacked “love of the Jewish people,” Arendt replied that she did not — indeed, could not — love any group but could only love individuals. Further, she warned that “the role of the ‘heart’ in politics” was often “to conceal factual truth” (2000, 292–93). Individuals would be particularly tempted to conceal political truths in ways that would excuse the bad acts and responsibility of their own groups, loving their own groups and failing to find them guilty of wrongdoing.

Arendt may be particularly hard on compassion in *On Revolution*, but she does not change her mind about it in her other writings. Indeed, a minor theme in her work is the unreliability of compassion — the flexibility with which compassion can be deployed by political actors. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, this flexibility is revealed by the fact that compassion is not always for the suffering other but, instead, can be turned back on the self. In her consideration of Nazi “psychology” (although she doesn’t call it this), Arendt considers the question of conscience and argues that it is inaccurate to conclude that prominent architects of the Holocaust possessed no conscience because they committed mass murder. Rather, she says, we can see in prominent Nazis the permutations and inversions of conscience and the tactics by which many avoided enduring the moral responses of “normal men” to human suffering. One such “trick” “consisted of turning these instincts [of pity] around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed on my shoulders!” (1977, 106). Arendt is concerned with moral actors who administered the machinery of the Third Reich’s mass extermination of European Jews, but the phenomenon she describes also can be discovered in other contexts.

In the case of Christian conservative compassion, this practice of turning compassion on the self (and on one’s own in-group) is evident in the ex-gay movement. Although it advertises to those outside the movement, ex-gay programs and therapies are almost entirely consumed by same-sex attracted Christian conservatives, their families, and communities (Drescher 2001).<sup>5</sup> Compassion pedagogy within the ex-gay movement encourages its audience to take themselves, and others with whom they identify most closely, as objects of compassion. Thus, parents who dread the disappointment of a homosexual child become objects of compassion that the ex-gay movement serves, as do same-sex attracted people who repent their desires and dread the dismay of their parents, friends, and religious communities (Burack 2008b, 84–99). In this way,

Christian conservatives are taught that unapologetically gay people who are harmed by social stigma or discriminatory legislation are less deserving of compassion than those who suffer the close and unexpected proximity of gay friends and relations.

A final problem with compassionate politics is suggested in Arendt's other work, including in her book of essays, *Beyond Past and Future*, and in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. In *Lectures*, she responds to the belief that critical thinking can be understood as consisting of "an enormously enlarged empathy" that captures the feelings, including the suffering, of others. On the contrary, she asserts that we cannot "know what actually goes on" in others and, so, must decide for ourselves what conditions others inhabit and what kinds of judgments we will make about their situation by putting *ourselves* in the place of the other and "taking the viewpoints of others into account." Here is Arendt's interpretation of Kant's "enlargement of the mind": "To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting." For Arendt, the problem with empathy — feeling with the other, as well as acting politically on those feelings — is that it is unreliable and presumptuous. We cannot know what the other is feeling, but we may come to know what we would feel and think in the other's place, say, in the place of someone who lives in a "specific slum dwelling" (1982, 42–44; 1977). The judgments we form as a result of this process of representative thinking are an important component of the broader category of political reason (Beiner 1982, 107–8).

Arendt's arguments on compassionate politics are clear, but they are less relevant to assessing the compassion campaigns of the Christian right than we might assume even if we do not dismiss Christian right compassion for same-sex attracted "strugglers" and women who have had an abortion outright. The compassionate morality projects of the Christian right are dissimilar enough from the compassion politics that Arendt deplores to call into question the applicability of Arendt's concerns. An explication of the differences between these conceptualizations of compassion also raises provocative new questions: about the meaning of Christian right compassion and about the ways in which Arendt's thought can speak to the theological politics of the movement.

## THE MISERABLE ONES

Two key differences between "Arendt's" compassion and that of the Christian right render her critique impracticable for analyzing the

Christian right's compassion campaigns. These differences are: the kind of group(s) that constitutes the object of compassionate politics, and the relationship that prevails between the subjects and objects of compassion in each discourse. Arendt's critique of the destructive effects of compassion on politics requires two groups: a suffering group whose immiserated condition should not be made the *raison d'être* of political action and a political elite that is capable of acting on behalf of those whose misery effectively exiles them and their concerns from the political sphere. She is concerned with traditional forms of compassion that justify revolutions and mass movements: compassion for suffering groups with which revolutionaries and other political actors identify and in whose name they stage political interventions aimed at ending misery and enacting justice.

Surveying the French Revolution and subsequent uprisings, Arendt treats compassion as a matter of sentiment for the indigent — “those who belong to the lower classes of society” — and, perforce, as substituting the motivation of economic need for political freedom. The French revolutionaries made the “welfare of the people,” their happiness, the basis for politics. In the American Revolution, Arendt argues, it was not difficult for the revolutionaries to identify with the people; all lacked fundamental forms of political freedom such that the revolutionaries served as “representatives in a common cause” rather than having to “summon up” a useable construct of solidarity (1990, 73, 74).

Is this distinction between cohorts of 18th-century revolutionaries relevant to antiabortion and antigay compassion campaigns today? Not directly; even though individual churches and groups sometimes engage in the delivery of social services, the Christian right does not target the poor for compassion or make their hidden neediness the object of its political agenda. Indeed, this difference between an emphasis on poverty and an emphasis on “cultural” issues such as same-sex sexuality and abortion continues to define the boundary between Christian left and Christian right priorities (Wallis 2006).<sup>6</sup> However, compassionate politics do require an object on whose interests, and in whose name, political actors will act. As in Arendt's critique of revolutionary compassion/pity, a precondition of Christian right compassion is the misery of those who will be its proper objects — those whose immiserated condition sets the stage for compassionate intervention. However, instead of the traditional objects of compassion of whom Arendt

writes, the Christian right produces quite different objects of compassion: “strugglers” (a movement term for those who repudiate their same-sex desires) and women who have undergone an abortion. Along with those objects, the movement produces ideology that sustains its own interpretation of misery, and that defines the boundaries of ostensibly suffering groups.

It is useful to consider the misery associated with the objects of sexuality politics more carefully. In the case of Arendt’s lower classes (and the revolutionaries’), the finding of misery is an empirical matter: poverty is a matter of insufficient food, clothing, shelter, and impoverished neediness and misery are overlapping — even if not identical — phenomena.<sup>7</sup> In contemporary sexuality politics, by contrast, the misery of those who are members of the target groups is not really an empirical matter. Rather, it is an ideological assumption and a form of pedagogy that defines the quality of repentance for Christian conservatives. Antiabortion and antigay ideology helps to produce the consequence it purports to discover.

Four classes of person are relevant to this analysis because these distinctions are central to Christian right compassion: repentant women who have had abortions, unrepentant women who have had abortions; women and men who struggle against their same-sex attraction and reject a same-sex sexual identity; women and men who experience same-sex attraction, engage in same-sex sexuality and relationships, and who do not repudiate their sexuality. Of these categories of persons, only the repentant are proper objects of conservative Christian compassion, because their repentance *and their willingness to embrace a miserable identity* situate them as deserving a compassionate response. So, for example, repentant women form new identities as women suffering from Post-Abortion Syndrome by embracing that diagnosis and understanding it as a moral consequence of their sinful behavior.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, same-sex attracted women and men who recite the unavoidable miseries of living a gay life are appropriate objects of compassion even if they have never actually lived such a life and are relying upon the reports of others (Erzen 2006, 109–11).<sup>9</sup>

In this moral economy, unrepentant actors — women who have undergone abortion, lesbians, gay men, and (in the rare cases that they come in for attention from Christian conservatives) bisexuals — are read by the Christian right as miserable even if they do not experience their condition in this way. These heedless hedonists are “miserable individuals,” objectively, if not subjectively (Mill 2001; Hamburger 1999). Christian right

descriptions of same-sex sexuality are lurid accounts of the miserable individuality of gays. Even in the quarters of Christian antigay politics that combine compassion with traditional antigay politics, same-sex attracted people who refuse to abstain from sexual activity and romantic relationships are described as leading unhappy lives dedicated to low pleasures and deserving of stigma, censure, social invisibility, and legal sanctions.<sup>10</sup> In the final analysis, members of these groups are all “miserable,” but they are miserable in meaningfully different ways that justify and subtend the different consequences believers are called upon to deliver.

Christian right compassion campaigns target groups that are not generally associated with material misery, though they are associated with social stigma and, in the case of lesbians and gay men, with organized discrimination. Indeed, far from allying themselves with the materially needy, the Christian right is often sympathetic to corporate interests and is extremely skeptical about government provision of social welfare.<sup>11</sup> In Christian right discourse, gay people are represented not as abject or in need of protective legislation but as both politically more powerful and economically more affluent than heterosexual citizens. This mendacious characterization is not applied to “strugglers,” but the Christian right does locate strugglers and women who have had an abortion in the symbolic space occupied by the poor and powerless of other political ideologies. Not materially needy, they nevertheless remain in need of certain kinds of protections. One such compassionate intervention involves helping same-sex attracted people avoid the temptation of same-sex marriage by outlawing such unions.<sup>12</sup> Another, of course, would obviate the possibility of women having to undergo the torment of having chosen abortion by making a legal abortion impossible to obtain.

Students of the Christian right have often called attention to the central importance of “emotions that matter” in the movement’s ideology and pedagogy (Kintz 1997). It is indeed crucial for critics of the movement to understand how the language of the heart works to constitute the belief system and the values and feelings of many Christian conservative followers. Not surprisingly, Arendt’s response to motivations of the heart is a muscular skepticism. Arendt’s “unconsoling and austere” “relationship to suffering” requires that public forms of love and compassion be subjected to rigorous reality testing. As Deborah Nelson puts it, “the only way to become a realist, and for Arendt we all must do so for our mutual survival, is to cultivate a

suspicion of intellectual and psychological comfort in whatever forms we find them” (2004, 241).

## HEARTS OR MINDS?

What is at stake for Arendt in her critique of compassion in politics is the existence of politics itself. Kateb sums up Arendt’s concern by noting that “a politicized love of humanity sponsors appalling ruin in political life” and that “compassion and pity are the fertile source of political crime and terror” (1984, 91, 94). However, this critique is not as productive a guide to evaluating the ideology of the Christian right as it might at first appear to be; the sexuality compassion campaigns of the Christian right do not reproduce Arendt’s conception of compassion in a way that would provoke her critique. Christian right compassion projects are not aimed at immiserated populations. Rather, they are concerted attempts to discursively script a social and political reality in which particular groups deserve compassion while others who are understood as needing it — they are miserable whether they know it or not — do not deserve it. In terms of Arendt’s thought, the distinction is crucial because a dominant anxiety about the realm of politics is that it is fragile and easily overwhelmed by the demands of material necessity, either from within the household or from needy and undifferentiated mobs (Arendt 1958).

Conservative Christians for whom the movement’s pedagogy is intended become political subjects who are encouraged to respond with appropriate emotions and actions, delivering compassionate help to those struggling with same-sex desire or with a past decision to have an abortion and condemnation to those who reject the role that compassionate ideology scripts for them. One important caveat: by drawing this conclusion, I do not claim that there is no compassion among those individuals who constitute the conservative Christian movement. I do not doubt that many of these individuals experience and express compassion for those they consider harmed or morally burdened by abortion or same-sex desire. However, the politics of the Christian right *movement* is not the sum of the feelings of its individual members even when leaders engage in pedagogies designed to instruct followers in certain kinds of sentiments and responses and induce these sentiments and responses from them. Rather, the movement is a coordinated set of projects aimed at changes in subjectivity, political culture, and public policy. Central to the aspirations of the movement is a reformation, or perhaps

reclamation, of moral categories that distinguish deserving from undeserving (Burack 2008a). Nowhere is this reformation of moral distinctions more important than in the domains of sexuality and reproductive rights.

Even if Christian right compassion bears little resemblance to the kind of compassion Arendt criticizes as destructive to politics, her work can still help us understand what kind of cultural and political work compassion campaigns perform. One dimension of her thought that is useful for evaluating these compassion campaigns is her emphasis on the meaning and value of plurality. She defines the idea of plurality in its relation to political action:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. . . . Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live (1958, 7–8).

Plurality is essential for political action because action discloses the individuality of an actor to fellow citizens. Without these citizens, no action or political agency is possible, so plurality secures the possibility of a public sphere in which speech and other kinds of political action can take place.

The concept of plurality might easily be read as a concern with the presence, absence, or collective “voice” of identity groups in public life, but this is not Arendt’s plurality, at least in the first instance. For her, “a political community that constitutes itself on the basis of a prior, shared, and stable identity threatens to close the spaces of politics” (Honig 1992, 227). Her first concern, then, is with “the preservation of individuality in a common life” — “who” rather than “what” we are (Arendt 1958, 179–81; Ring 1991, 433–52).<sup>13</sup> Even so, however, identity groups, socially constructed entities that they are, are “politically relevant” because all actions take place in particular political contexts in which group identifications have effects and in which individuals may challenge the meaning, if not the fact, of their belonging to identity groups (Bickford 1995).<sup>14</sup> It is this recognition of the significance of group identity that encourages Hanna Pitkin to read Arendt’s concerns with plurality and citizenship in two quite different ways. The first is the course of individuality; as Pitkin puts it, “Be who you uniquely are!” The second, perhaps most relevant to the figure of the pariah, is “Maintain solidarity

with ‘your people’!” As Pitkin notes, there is more than a little conflict between these alternatives, neither of which is sufficient on its own as a guide to negotiating the course of membership in a particular polity (Pitkin 1998, 158).

Plurality has implications for individual citizens, but it also has implications for political movements and the forms of politics these movements advance or foreclose. Students of the Christian right have often noted that the movement’s discourse excludes *gay people* from its representation of homosexuality. For example, Scott Barclay points out “the strange absence of gays” in Christian right discourse about same-sex marriage. Barclay shows that Christian right leaders often substitute sex and gender difference for sexuality and sexual orientation in rhetoric about same-sex sexuality, a move that discloses anxieties about changing gender roles and their importance in stabilizing or undermining heterosexuality. But he also notes that when they are mentioned, lesbians and gay men usually appear in discourse in the abstract, for example, as a group that poses a threat to Christian conservatives. Another common form of representation is to conflate gay individuals with the “faceless political actions” of LGBT civil rights organizations that, like homosexuals as a group, threaten heterosexuals, Christians (and Christianity), and America (Barclay 2007).

Political speech that excludes queer people in favor of the abstraction of homosexuality may reveal widespread discomfort with sexuality. Shame and discomfort about sexuality or specifically about minority sexuality may be found in many venues and it may be the reason why even Christian opinion leaders who do not adopt the most punitive of perspectives toward gay people tend toward abstraction when dealing with same-sex sexuality. In interviews with mainline clergy that they conducted in 2000, Laura Olson and Wendy Cadge found that ministers in mainline Christian denominations “who choose to speak on homosexuality tend to frame the issue in terms of the diffuse notion of ‘homosexuality,’ rather than talking about gay men and lesbians as people” (Olson and Cadge 2002, 153).

It would be possible that Christian right discourse exhibits a similar use of abstraction to mask shame and discomfort about sexuality but for the fact that the Christian right movement has often marketed graphic and negative depictions of same-sex sexuality to Christian conservative followers. The existence of this in-group discourse suggests that the exclusion of lesbians and gay men is not a side-effect of discomfort with public talk about matters presumed to be properly private but is,

instead, a deliberate tool of political pedagogy. Taking such in-group rhetoric into account suggests that one way to interpret abstraction is that it facilitates disidentification of Christian conservatives with those who are disadvantaged by public policies aimed at sexual minorities. Both opprobrious descriptions of same-sex sexuality and characterizations of queer people as a nihilistic and destructive bloc would perform similar work, discouraging Christian conservatives from identifying with gays.

Yet the psychological process of identification (or disidentification) is not pertinent to an Arendtian perspective. Arendt abhorred substitutions of psychology and psychological processes — the darkness and interiority of the human heart — for political ones. What her work would recommend instead of a concern with identification, and corollaries like empathy and the unconscious, is representative thinking, the enlarged mentality that is thereby enhanced, and the related political faculty of judgment. The demands of exercising representative thinking are strenuous including, for example, “disregarding . . . self-interest” while “taking the viewpoints of others into account.” Arendt’s conception of this process differs from Kant’s own in the sense that Arendt does not embrace the idea of a “general standpoint of ‘any’ man” (Disch 1994, 156). Instead, she insists on the importance of listening to concrete others and imagining the many standpoints that would emerge from different situations: “The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would think and feel if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking” (Arendt 1977, 241).

One way to read Arendt’s account of representative thinking is to conceptualize it as a retrenchment to rationalism over emotionalism, but this dichotomy misleads. Far from lauding transcendent reason and the intellectual isolation that may be associated with it, “politics” and representative thinking alike require publicity and plurality. The “I” of Arendtian thinking is inextricably related to, as well as separated from, the others with whom she acts in the public sphere. It is likely that the concept and process of “thinking” to which Arendt dedicated so much of her work is not sufficient to prevent great harm-doing (Alford 2006, 95–99). But thinking in Arendt’s sense does clarify and reinforce the importance of meaning and intersubjectivity over incontestable truths, however they may be obtained (Arendt 1981, 3–17). As David Gutterman points out, the process of representative thinking is inextricable from listening to and reflecting upon the stories that people tell about their situations,

traditions, and identities. This capacity and practice is essential to democratic politics in a “plural polity” because to successfully share the world with others citizens must be willing to defamiliarize their own sacred stories and to encounter the unfamiliar (2005, 37–40). Indeed, Gutterman contrasts Christian left and right orientations toward democratic politics in part by outlining the ways in which Christian right groups like Promise Keepers encourage their members to minimize contact with fellow citizens who do not share their views. Those “who are different — be they worshippers of holy cows, radical feminists, or any other unbelievers” pose “a risk to one’s own purity” (125).

Not surprisingly, Christian right compassion campaigns do not aim to encourage representative thinking and the development of an enlarged mentality among followers. In fact, Christian right compassion pedagogy discourages the development of representative thinking that runs the risk of violating conservative Christian doctrine. If this is so in general, it is particularly true of discourse directed to or about members of sexually stigmatized groups. Christian right antigay pedagogy aims to cultivate compassion for, and perhaps even identification with, those who suffer because of the unbidden appearance of same-sex attracted people in their midst. This group includes parents, siblings, and other blood relatives of lesbians and gay men and members of churches and religious communities who find themselves worshipping with and ministering to same-sex attracted people.

Christian conservative developmental or ex-gay discourse does not, however, invite heterosexual readers or listeners to imagine what it would be like to discover same-sex sexual attraction in themselves. Same-sex desires and those who come to understand themselves as same-sex attracted are always “other” to the Christian conservative, even when Christian conservatives minister to same-sex attracted people who hail from Christian conservative families and consider themselves conservative believers. Likewise, antiabortion discourse does not situate Christian conservatives to imagine themselves in the position of being confronted with an unwanted pregnancy or in conditions that would make child-bearing frightening or dangerous. Instead, the discourse cultivates conservative moral prescriptions against abortion (and sometimes contraception) and conservative religious prescriptions for sinners of repentance, public testimony and, increasingly, political activism.

The Christian right aspires not only to hold the line against the erosion of sexual stigma in the United States and elsewhere in the world but to

reverse its course and to reaffirm traditionalist Christian principles regarding sexual morality. To this end, movement leaders formulate political discourse that treats same-sex sexuality as a dreaded abstraction and avoids information about the lives of gay people, including the consequences of sexual stigma and antigay public policies. Also relevant to Arendt's concerns with plurality and representative thinking is the fact that large percentages of Christian conservatives successfully minimize contact with queer people.<sup>15</sup> As researchers have established, those who do not have contact with queers are more successful at retaining antigay beliefs, while those who report contact with gay people report lower levels of antigay beliefs (Altemeyer 2001; 2007).

In Arendtian terms, the motivation of compassion does not insulate political actors from criticism; indeed, Arendt sees in compassionate politics a threat to politics itself. One possible (though perhaps unlikely) response of those who champion compassionate approaches to abortion and same-sex desire could be to relate their efforts to Arendt's own distinction between categories of the social and the political. In this scenario, compassion campaigns do not threaten the integrity of politics because they are confined to private relationships, decisions, and activity, from social supports for women who have had an abortion to therapies and support groups for same-sex attracted strugglers. Although this distinction is plausible, it is not consistent with the reality of compassionate projects and their integration into the broader Christian right movement. Hence, both Arendt's concerns with compassion and her arguments for plurality as a condition of politics remain.

## REVISITING COMPASSION CAMPAIGNS

Although many compassion campaigns exist as free-standing projects, they are linked to other forms of antigay and antiabortion politics. Some groups engage in compassionate projects in the area of sexuality without direct ties to national organizations that operate in policy arenas to deny rights to individuals, a variety of linkages between compassion campaigns and Christian right political projects such as conferences, lobbying, publishing, policy scorecards, ballot initiatives, and "beauty contests" of conservative candidates for political office, are common. Major Christian right policy and lobbying organizations, such as Concerned Women for America, the Family Research Council, and Focus on the Family (and its "completely [legally] separate" lobbying

organization, Focus on the Family Action), practice both kinds of politics.<sup>16</sup> That is, some campaigns specifically formed for the purpose of engaging in compassionate forms of intervention on behalf of same-sex attracted people and women who have had abortions are projects of national organizations that also engage in more traditional forms of antigay and antiabortion politics. Even for independent groups and their compassionate projects, tight cooperation between compassion campaigns and traditional forms of conservative politics is the norm.

An example of a national organization that engages in both compassionate and traditional forms of antigay politics is Focus on the Family, which sponsors ex-gay Love Won Out conferences across the United States (Burack 2008b, 68–99; Burack and Josephson 2005). Cooperation between compassionate and traditional political arms of the movement is evident in such venues as the September, 2006 Family Research Council's Values Voter Summit, held in Washington, DC. The Summit featured an appearance by Georgette Forney, President of the antiabortion organization NOEL and co-founder of the Silent No More Campaign.<sup>17</sup> Forney spoke to the crowd of Christian conservatives about her mission to serve women in the "post-abortion community," to "reach out to those who are suffering in silence" because of an abortion in their past. Forney spoke of the specifically Christian and compassionate underpinnings of her work, noting that her mission on behalf of women who have had an abortion was founded on the love of Jesus Christ. The Silent No More Awareness Campaign engages in public outreach and travels to different cities in the United States and United Kingdom to encourage women to share their personal testimonies of regret over their own abortion decision; public gatherings organized by the group feature women holding signs that say "I regret my abortion."<sup>18</sup>

In her contribution to the Values Voter Summit, Forney focused on the compassionate social campaign that she helped to found, its theology of repentance, and the community-building value of public witness, not on antiabortion laws and public policies. Other speakers supplemented Forney's compassionate approach with more recognizable conservative political discourse about abortion, a division of labor that had the effect of linking compassion campaigns with antiabortion (and antigay) discourse as two complementary forms of Christian conservative politics. Rick Scarborough of Vision America linked *Roe v. Wade* to stem cell research and said of both that "Adolf Hitler would be proud." Gary Bauer, Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS), Ann Coulter, Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), and former Kansas Attorney General Phill Kline all

spoke out against abortion rights. Of these speakers, Bauer fused compassion discourse with antiabortion politics when he noted that the Christian right does not hate women as its critics often charge but merely “wants the exploitation of women to stop” (Cahill and Burack 2006).

Along with antigay compassion, antiabortion compassion like this rhetoric constitutes the cutting edge of Christian right sexuality politics. Such rhetoric and the compassion campaigns from which it springs constitute a challenge to critics of the movement. Driven not by something as simple as *hate*, as critics often charge, but by something more complicated than *love*, compassion campaigns must be evaluated in ways that inquire into their strategic motivations as well as their multiple effects. As a movement, the Christian right seeks to shore up and restore traditional sexual identity and gender roles, and the stigmatized status of same-sex sexuality in order to achieve a number of ends. These include: reinforcing a particular version of Christian morality in believer-activists, enacting antigay and antiabortion — “family values”-friendly — public policies, transforming American culture in ways that are consistent with the movement’s conception of sexuality and sexual immorality and, in eschatological terms, turning God’s wrath away from an America that is perceived to court divine judgment with every cultural and political shift.

Critics of the Christian right accuse the movement of crafting compassionate discourse in an attempt to obscure the punitive, theological, anti-individual rights foundations of its politics. These critics are not completely wrong, of course. Like other carefully constructed and executed forms of political discourse and action, compassion can function as a strategy that immunizes political actors and ideologies against accusations of hatred and extremism. However, if compassion campaigns have other effects besides such political payoffs — effects such as calling forth compassion from Christian conservative followers and defining for many the appropriate boundaries of compassion — such campaigns require more careful assessment. Hannah Arendt’s critique of compassion in, or as, politics is one starting point for such an assessment.

Arendt has been taken to task by some readers for defining politics in such a way as to stigmatize compassion, to diminish its role in politics, and to leave in its place a conception of politics that is agonistic, masculine, and amoral. It is a tribute to her depth as a thinker that we continue to have these arguments about Arendt and that readers continue to find in her work resources for alternative conceptions of politics that are neither

amoral nor perhaps even entirely heartless. In any case, however Arendt theorized the likely effects of compassionate forms of politics, not all forms of mass compassion are equally subject to Arendt's critique. Christian conservatives associate compassion with efforts to fight sexual sinfulness for the benefit of those who are caught in its grasp. At the same time, the political instruction that accompanies compassion clarifies a second goal: to contain sexual sinfulness so that the behaviors and political commitments associated with it — abortion and gay rights — do not contaminate American culture and politics.

However different from each other, these goals are inconsistent with the kind of compassionate politics that so worried Arendt. They are, however, vulnerable to being analyzed and criticized from the perspective of other aspects of her political thought. Compassionate or not, political efforts to diminish plurality, foreclose representative thinking, and install a particular ideal of goodness as a basis for citizenship are a problem for Arendt and for us all.

## NOTES

1. The Silent No More Awareness Campaign is a Project of Anglicans for Life and Priests for Life. It can be found on the web at <http://www.silentnomoreawareness.org/>. See Focus on the Family, "Think About It Online" (*Focus* 2007) <http://www.thinkaboutitonline.com>. (Accessed March 26, 2007).

2. A number of theorists have been critical of Arendt's uncompromising repudiation of compassion in politics, including George Kateb and Kathleen B. Jones.

3. The quote is from back matter to the 1990 edition.

4. Arendt might have understood herself (in her own terms) as a spectator in this case, as she was using the faculty of judgment to construct meaning from past political action. For this distinction between actor and spectator, see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 192 and Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

5. In Christian conservative literature in the ex-gay genre, this term is often rendered by the abbreviation SSA, as in SSA women and SSA men.

6. Evidence of distinct perspectives on poverty on the Christian right and left is available in many texts and contexts. Consider the debate between Jim Wallis, author and founder of Sojourners, and Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention at the 2007 Values Voter Summit in Washington DC (October 19–21, 2007). When Wallis raised the issue of Christians responding to poverty, Land countered by noting that poor children could not be helped out of poverty if they were killed before they were born. Land went on to compare abortion with slavery and to emphasize the need to use the levers of law to end the right to abortion.

7. In *On Revolution*, Arendt differentiates the French and American Revolutions by distinguishing poverty (a widespread condition in both nations) and misery (a condition widespread in France but not in the US) and by clarifying the relationship between the two (for her, poverty does not inevitably lead to misery). Arendt does not discuss American slaves or slavery in these passages, so it is possible to dispute the empirical accuracy of her claim that "the laborious in America were poor but not miserable." Setting aside the accuracy of this distinction, however, Arendt clearly connects misery with "want" and the political invisibility that often does — though it need not necessarily — follow from it. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 68–69.

8. There is a large literature on post-abortion syndrome. For a popular media review of the literature, conservative arguments, and post-abortion syndrome pedagogy see Emily Bazelon, "Is There a Post-Abortion Syndrome?" For a recent study that has generated a great deal of controversy see David M. Fergusson, L. John Horwood, and Elizabeth M Ridder, "Abortion in Young Women and Subsequent Mental Health." Perhaps in response to the controversy over the Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder study, the American Psychological Association is currently rewriting its 2005 "APA Briefing Paper on the Impact of Abortion on Women."

9. Erzen points out that some people in ex-gay ministries have never experienced a same-sex sexual relationship. Such individuals rely on other ex-gays and on movement literature for their knowledge of gay community and sexuality.

10. Antigay "researcher" Paul Cameron has specialized in these characterizations, but he is only one of the more visible spokespersons. See, for example, Cameron, *The Gay 90s: What the Empirical Evidence Reveals about Homosexuality*.

11. Although this market orientation has not been a constant throughout the long history of the US Christian right, it characterizes the lobbying efforts and political discourse of the contemporary movement. One example is the 2007 lobbying campaign of the Family Research Council against Democratic congressional efforts to increase funding for SCHIP (the State Children's Health Insurance Program). National Christian right organizations routinely denounce universal health insurance and other government programs designed to mitigate the negative effects of the operation of markets on citizens.

12. Exodus International President Alan Chambers has appeared in one advertising campaign against same-sex marriage that is premised on compassion for strugglers.

13. Many students of Arendt's work comment on her distinction between "who" and "what" one is and its implication for politics.

14. Of course, individuals may also challenge (or deny) their identification with identity groups, but Arendt is strenuous in rejecting this alternative. See Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*. For an example of personal impatience with this possibility, see her account of her own Jewish identity in the conversation with Gershom Scholem. Arendt considered being a woman irrelevant to her political theorizing, thus challenging the significance, but not the fact, of gender identity; see Jennifer Ring, *The Political Consequences of Thinking: Gender and Judaism in the Work of Hannah Arendt*. For a dissenting view on identity, see Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism," 230–31.

15. Groups that report not knowing anybody who is gay at higher rates than other Americans include men, conservative Republicans, non-college graduates, and older and rural Americans. For survey data that include these demographic categories, see PEW Research Center, "Four in-Ten Americans Have Close Friends or Relatives Who are Gay."

16. See Focus on the Family Action on the web at <http://www.citizenlink.org/focusaction/>.

17. NOEL was originally an acronym for National Organization of Episcopalians for Life, recently renamed Anglicans for Life.

18. One such event was staged at the Annual March for Life in Washington, DC on January 22, 2008 and included testimonies from both (post-abortive) women and men.

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