ORIGIN STORIES: SAME-SEX SEXUALITY AND CHRISTIAN RIGHT POLITICS

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In this paper, we examine dominant Christian conservative narratives of the origins of same-sex sexuality. Critics of the Christian right usually focus on a narrative of choice that Christian right organisations and activists use to explain the origins of same-sex sexuality. A choice narrative grounds a range of political positions and, in many contexts, effectively neutralises both claims of discrimination and public support for potential legal remedies. On the other hand, a narrative of development receives less attention from critics of the Christian right. Although it cannot be reduced to its political efficacy, the narrative of development has a political as well as therapeutic function. Indeed, this narrative circulates tacitly through a different set of public debates than those usually associated with the narrative of choice, including debates over programmes geared to eliminate antigay harassment in public schools. The two narratives create tensions within Christian conservative thought that can destabilise antigay social and political projects.

KEYWORDS Christian right; gay rights; ex-gay movement; sexual identity; compassion; safe schools movement

Being of Two Minds

Equal rights for people with a same-sex sexual orientation remain fiercely contested in many parts of the world today. In the US, the recent court decision in Lawrence v Texas, 2004, far from settling the citizenship status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, has exacerbated political differences and propelled support for a constitutional amendment to prohibit same-sex marriage. Survey data consistently demonstrate that religious beliefs strongly predict antigay sentiment and political attitudes. Among religious believers, White evangelical Christians, and especially conservative Christian activists, hold these antigay attitudes most consistently (Kellstedt and Smidt 1996; Kellstedt et. al., 1996; Pew Forum 2003). It is important to look closely at the beliefs and political activism of American Christian conservatives both because of their influence...
on American policy and because of the global scope of their evangelical and political outreach (Buss and Herman, 2003).

It is often difficult to distinguish different kinds of antigay social and political discourse. However, if we look beneath the surface of antigay social attitudes, we find different strains of antigay belief that have different effects on the framing of political issues and political activism. In this paper, we examine two different articulations of the origins of same-sex desire and identity that circulate within the Christian right. As different as these articulations are—and in some respects as inconsistent with one another—they forge crucial foundations for different kinds of organised antigay politics. In addition, we consider the ways in which compassion operates within projects that rely on a narrative of development for moral and political persuasion.

Why do origins of homosexuality matter to Christian conservatives? The existence of people who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer constitutes a significant challenge to conservative Christian believers. Since the Bible does not offer any specific explanation for the origins of same-sex sexuality and gender variations, conservative Christians must turn to other sources. A great deal is at stake, then, for conservative Christian activists in producing a compelling story about the origins of homosexuality. Why should queer people care about these origin stories? The stories, of course, have a variety of political uses. But it is a mistake to assume that the origin stories of Christian conservatives are purely utilitarian. Rather, the two origin stories that we discuss here are both founded in deeply held beliefs that have great emotional resonance for Christian activists. This is evident both in the conflict between those activists who adhere to narratives of choice and development, and in the narrative of the ex-gay movement as one enactment of Christian compassion.

Those who criticise the Christian right for its support of a wide palette of antigay politics usually focus on one conservative Christian narrative of homosexual origins—the narrative of choice. Arguing that same-sex sexuality is a ‘choice’ subverts a range of political positions. In many contexts, it effectively neutralises both queer claims of discrimination and public support for potential legal remedies. For example, this narrative has been effective in conservative Christian efforts to join forces with African-American religious leaders in opposition to such gay rights issues as same-sex marriage (Cohen 1999; Dillard 2001). On the other hand, critics of the Christian right often neglect a second narrative—a narrative of development—even though such a narrative has been consistently elaborated throughout the period of the rise and consolidation of the new Christian right. What may account for the relative visibility of one kind of narrative to critics of the Christian right and the relative invisibility of the other are the nature of the political struggles in which major lesbian and gay civil rights organisations have engaged. Because the narrative of choice has been such a potent tool for the Christian right, both in mobilising its own members and in persuading others to support its political positions, critics have given it more attention.
But what of the other narrative about homosexual origins? Even though some of its political functions are not immediately apparent, the narrative of development also has such functions even if it does not have a singular political provenance. Indeed, it circulates tacitly through a different set of public debates than those usually associated with the narrative of choice. A caution: by saying that these narratives about homosexual identity serve political functions for Christian right organising and issue negotiation we do not mean to suggest that they are, as some critics suggest, merely expedient grounds for pre-existing political formulations. Progressive critics of the right are more accurate when they describe the narrative of choice as an expedient political strategy than they are when they collapse these different narratives together and treat them as one. This said, even narratives that are largely or exclusively created as political strategy may simultaneously reflect genuine—even if new and evolving—affective and theological commitments and may underwrite marginalising and discriminatory forms of politics. We are concerned here with the ways in which specific conceptualisations of same-sex sexuality and gay identity can provide underlying assumptions that support a wide range of political projects and interventions.

The Narrative of Choice

Most critics of the Christian right’s antigay politics recognise the political significance of its conception of homosexuals as those who exercise free will and engage in homosexual acts. This dominant narrative of choice with regard to sexuality is widely recognised as central to a variety of Christian right political initiatives in the 1990s. Thus, in the debate over Colorado’s Amendment Two, the conservative group Colorado for Family Values (CFV) argued that ‘homosexuality is a willful behavioural choice, not an identity’ (Schultze and Guilfoyle 1998). The political function of such a position is not far to seek: ‘If gay sexuality is a choice... it is not a candidate for civil rights protections’ (Hardesty 1999). In terms of public opinion, scholars also find that Americans are more likely to support gay civil rights when they believe that same-sex sexual orientation is immutable and, conversely, less likely to support civil rights when they believe that same-sex sexuality is a ‘lifestyle choice’ (Wood and Bartkowski 2004). Therefore, we are not surprised to find that antigay political activists advocate a narrative of choice for same-sex sexuality and that lesbian and gay civil rights activists are more likely to endorse a narrative of immutability.²

As Didi Herman suggests in The Antigay Agenda, the narrative of choice is a powerful weapon in the Christian right arsenal, one that serves to anchor and justify antigay political activism (Herman 1997). This is so even at the cost of some internal contradictions in conservative Christian political discourse. One contradiction is between conservative Christian positions on sexuality and gender. As Herman points out, it is not consistent for conservative Christian leaders to simultaneously insist on the essential nature of gender identity and roles and the voluntaristic nature of sexual identity (Herman 1997:73). A second
contradiction Herman cites is between Christian right positions on the origins of homosexuality itself—the narrative of development (what Herman calls 'psy' theories') versus the 'preferred' narrative of choice (1997:71). However, these two lines of argument—although clearly inconsistent with one another—are more fruitfully seen as products of different, and sometimes conflicting, periods and projects in the trajectory of the Christian right.

This perspective is supported by Herman's observations about Christian right activists' own ambivalence about the usefulness of 'anti-immutability arguments'. Herman notes that many cutting-edge rights pragmatists prefer to drop the emphasis on the origins of same-sex sexuality as unimportant and concentrate on gay wealth and power to nullify lesbian and gay rights claims (1997:121-22). This pragmatic perspective can be very useful, as it was in the final weeks of the 2004 campaign against same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. However, neither anti-immutability arguments nor other narratives explaining the origin of same-sex sexuality have been jettisoned from Christian right discourse. Either activists in certain sectors of conservative Christian politics have not received the message that emphasis on the origins of same-sex sexuality is now counterproductive, or such an emphasis continues to be useful for some kinds of political (and other) activities.

Herman's approach to Christian right antigay narrative is to trace the evolution of attitudes toward lesbians and gay men in Christianity Today. The benefit of this approach is that it enables us to see dominant themes and orientations of a moderately conservative Christian media organ toward homosexuality over a period of several decades. A liability of the approach is that it can de-emphasise continuing themes that coexist with increasingly simple, strategic, and aggressive positions. In other words, it is important to map the ideological shifts of a political movement like the Christian right. It is also likely that we will obtain a different picture of the movement if we follow the themes that do develop even if they become minority or merely underplayed perspectives in the movement's politics. Indeed, the Christian right's emphasis on choice in the political conflicts of the past fifteen years has pushed the still robust narrative of development to the margins of public and scholarly attention.

The Narrative of Development

The narrative of development appears in a variety of venues, from literature on reparative therapies and counselling of repentant homosexuals to literature on Christian parenting and childhood. Accounts of the development of homosexuality do not vary significantly from one context to the next however much the focus—on adults in the case of reparative and ex-gay therapies and on children (and their parents) in the case of family counselling—gives the arguments a somewhat different tone. In both contexts where the narrative of development occurs the emphasis is on the continuity and force of same-sex desire over time in certain individuals. Most (although not all) authors in the development literature
disarticulate same-sex desire from gay identity, fixing ‘identity’ at either the point of behavioural capitulation to desire or at the point of willful entry into a ‘homosexual lifestyle’. Hence we use the concept of identity here not as most conservative Christian thinkers do but to gesture toward the way in which the literature of development ventures accounts of the development of sexual identity even when authors are reluctant to use that terminology.

The narrative of development of conservative Christian ministers and lay authors is not a new phenomenon. Its major themes were so well developed in the 1970s and 1980s that today the narrative offers more sophisticated versions of those early developmental psychological theories. In addition, by the 1990s, such works almost uniformly offer critiques of scientific studies on the biological origins and immutability of same-sex sexuality. These are intended to counter the popular consequences of provocative scientific research on biological, especially genetic, roots of same-sex orientation. The repudiation of immutability in Christian right developmental works is indistinguishable from the more popular versions circulated in the Christian right political activism of the last fifteen years, and it serves one shared purpose: to undermine credibility and public support for the LGBT movement. In addition, however, the developmental literature also has other purposes. These include responding to the fears of Christian families about child-rearing, affirming the possibility that swift intervention can interrupt pernicious developmental processes, and protecting—or rescuing—young people from homosexuality.

We will not try to document exhaustively the developmental arguments of conservative Christian writers over the last thirty years, but it is useful to examine the most salient dimensions of the narrative and to note some prominent examples of the literature. Three main arguments are present in these Christian developmental accounts of homosexual identity. First is the claim that homosexuality is forged to some degree in emotional responses to poor or damaged relations between adult(s), and especially parent(s), and child. In the conservative Christian literature on the development of same-sex desire, there are many variations on this theme. Two of these variations are absent same-sex parents and trauma—sexual or otherwise—to the child. However, the more usual psychological narrative of homosexual development implicates what readers might otherwise understand as good-enough parenting. Here, the variations are nuanced, and perhaps more frightening for their prosaic quality: failures to mirror or model appropriate masculinity or femininity, a lack of appropriate attention to a child’s emerging gender nonnormativity. Otherwise good-enough parents may be doubly to blame—for setting in motion the psychological development that culminates in adolescent same-sex desire and for failing to arrest that development through proper interventions.

The second dimension of the narrative of development is the principle that, although the onset of same-sex desire does not sentence individuals to a life of homosexuality, predispositions and homosexual desires are not easily reversed once they are formed. However much we might criticise the specifics of the
Christian right narrative of development, we might still agree that its proponents refer here to the development and consolidation of 'identity'.

Third is the claim that damaged proto- or 'prehomosexuals' can nonetheless decide not to engage in same-sex sexual behaviour and to further entrench their dysfunctional sexual identities. The rubric of addiction that circulates in many of these developmental texts is apropos of this point. For authors of developmental literature, sexual repetition alone does not cause same-sex sexuality, but repetition entrenches desire and identity—the sense of oneself as lesbian or gay. Hence, development can be read backward from addiction even when ministries focus their attention on healing same-sex sexual addiction and do not specify the developmental processes behind same-sex desire. Although the choice to engage in sexual behaviour clearly enters into the developmental paradigm at this late point, the two narratives of choice and development still must be distinguished from one another. In spite of some overlap and similarities, these two narratives arise within different contexts, are frequently championed by different political actors, and are used for different purposes.

**How Do They Get That Way?**

One early example of the developmental genre is Tim LaHaye's *The Unhappy Gays: What Everyone Should Know about Homosexuality*, published in 1978. In this book, the conservative Christian author and entrepreneur argues that to understand 'people who are sexually attracted to those of their own sex, we must look beyond their biological and chemical composition to an even more complex area, their psychological makeup' (LaHaye 1978:64). LaHaye argues that one dominant cause of same-sex sexual desire is a 'predisposition to homosexuality', which includes 'ingredients' such as 'temperament' (most homosexuals are melancholic) 'inadequate parental relationships', and 'insecurity about sexual identity' (1978:66-7). LaHaye is forceful about his perception—formed, he says, in interactions with numerous homosexuals—that a predisposition to homosexuality does not guarantee adult homosexual experience or self-identification. Predisposition is not homosexuality per se, but 'it may lead a person into homosexuality', and it certainly defines the nature of an individual's sexual desire even if it is not acted upon (1978:85).

In 1979, Frank M. du Mas followed LaHaye's *Unhappy Gays with Gay is Not Good*, a general exposé of homosexuality and gay life. Du Mas's is a social-scientific approach to 'children who are beginning to show signs or trends of future homosexual development'. He warns that parents should be concerned if symptoms of homosexuality (presented in appendices to the book) persist over a long period or increase in 'frequency and intensity' (1979:203). Du Mas intends his checklist appendices—E for males, F for females, and G for use with both males and females—to be used and scored by clinical professionals with adult patients. However, many of the checklist items are phrased as questions asked of children rather than about a distant childhood: 'particularly fearful
of playing baseball, especially the "fast ball". ‘has had an extreme and long-standing crush on a playmate, teacher, or adult of the same sex’ (for males); ‘is tomboyish coupled with a strong desire to be a boy . . . does not wear attractive girlish clothes’ (for females) (du Mas ibid, emphasis in the original). Both Du Mas’s phrasing and his use of the term ‘prehomosexual’ to describe such children suggests that he believes that both parents of prehomosexual children and adults in therapy to treat their own sexuality will benefit from his model in spite of his instruction that it is most appropriate for use with adults.

In the 1980s, Michael Saia published, Counseling the Homosexual: A Compassionate and Biblical Guide for Pastors and Counselors as well as Non-Professionals and Families. The central tenets of Saia’s ‘compassionate’ approach are by now well known to many critics of the Christian right. They include reaching out to homosexuals in love (and confronting the ‘revulsion’ that many heterosexual people experience toward gays), telling them the truth about God’s commandment against same-sex sexuality, and helping them to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In a chapter entitled, ‘What Went Wrong?’, Saia notes that gay men tell the ‘same old story’ about their childhood and concludes that ‘the homosexual man has had some kind of relationship problem with this father’ (Saia 1988:49). Although Saia concedes that there is no ‘iron-clad explanation of the development of homosexual tendencies’, he finds patterns that allow him to build a simple model of gay male development and an even simpler one of lesbian development. Like others, Saia takes ‘rejection by the father’ and subsequent ‘rejection of the male image’ as key pillars in the construction of gay male identity (1988:51-2). His much briefer account of ‘The Female Homosexual’ posits trauma, particularly sexual or other physical abuse, as a key cause of lesbian orientation (1988:57-8).

By the late 1980s to early 1990s, it is common for authors in the genre to respond to the possibility that homosexual orientation is innate and immutable. Saia briefly addresses and rejects this argument, as do Marlin Maddoux and Christopher Corbett in, Answers to the Gay Deception. Like their predecessors, Maddoux and Corbett conclude that ‘homosexuality is the sexualization of deep emotional needs which develop in childhood (Maddoux and Corbett 1994:34). It is only after development has done its work that the ‘decision to act upon the desire is in their hands’ (1994:35). In contrast, Jeffrey Satinover’s medicalised account of the origin of homosexuality suggests that ‘genes, environment, and choice’ all play a role. Nevertheless, in Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth, Satinover follows other authors in the development genre to make psychological disposition a precursor to the choice to engage in same-sex sexual behaviour. Markers of male homosexuality are ‘sensitivity’, a distant father, ‘defensive detachment’ in the boy, and a longing for love (Satinover 1996). At the time of publication, Satinover was a medical advisor for Focus on the Family, and the book is endorsed by conservatives of many faith traditions.

If many conservative Christians who write on the origins of homosexuality are unfamiliar to informed readers, James Dobson is a familiar Christian right
leader. In his best-selling book, Bringing Up Boys, Dobson subscribes to a developmental account of homosexuality, many features of which are familiar from earlier works. For Dobson, adult male homosexuality is prefigured by ‘a condition we might call “prehomosexuality”’ (Dobson 2001:115). The ‘disorder is not typically “chosen”,’ but this does not mean that it is ‘inherited’ (although a ‘biological predisposition’ may exist). Citing both John Paulk’s ‘momentary setback’ in a gay nightclub in 2000 and Robert Spitzer’s controversial recent research on the consequences of reparative therapy, Dobson builds a case for overcoming homosexuality. Throughout, Dobson strives for a respectful tone that blends psychological developmental facts with empathy for those afflicted with same-sex desires. To parents he offers direct advice:

If you as a parent have an effeminate boy or a masculinized girl, I urge you to get a copy of A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality and then seek immediate professional help. Be very careful whom you consult, however. Getting the wrong advice at this stage could be most unfortunate, solidifying the tendencies that are developing... Most secular psychiatrists, psychologist, and counselors would, I believe, take the wrong approach——telling your child that he is homosexual and needs to accept that fact. You as parents would then be urged to consider the effeminate behavior to be healthy and normal. That is exactly what you and your son don’t need! (Dobson 2001:123).

As this passage suggests, Dobson relies extensively on Joseph Nicolosi’s work on homosexuality. Longtime contributors to debates over same-sex sexuality, Joseph and Linda Ames Nicolosi are authors of A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality. The Nicolosis position the book as a scientific account of development. However, they sustain close intellectual and institutional ties to more familiar Christian right figures through the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality (NARTH) and related activities. Dobson relies on the Nicolosis for his own formulation of developmental narrative, citing him at length in Bringing Up Boys. In turn, the Nicolosis offer a prefatory blurb by Dobson, with others by such antigay luminaries as Charles Socarides, John Paulk and Lynn D Wardle.

A Parent’s Guide certainly reinforces the stigmatising antigay perspective of the Christian right. But it does so by reinforcing compassion for children with damaged gender identities and for the parents whose sex- and gender-related hopes for their children are disappointed. Noting the smaller percentage of women who identify exclusively as lesbian, the Nicolosis concentrate more on the prevention of homosexuality in boys. They emphasise parental anxieties about gender nonconformity and the spectre of adult homosexuality, including the details of communication between parents (mostly mothers) and Joseph Nicolosi.

It is interesting to note that A Parent’s Guide is similar to many pieces of Christian right development literature in holding fathers, rather than mothers, responsible for the development of homosexuality. It is not that this literature ignores mothers and the unconscious forms of mothering that may precipitate especially male homosexuality As in much socially conservative literature on
child-development, women who parent children without men in the household are implicitly, if not explicitly, held responsible for poor outcomes associated with single-parent family arrangements (Nicolosi and Nicolosi 2002:76). However, most literature on homosexual development makes more of fathers' than mothers' influence on the adult sexuality of children. Indeed, early examples anticipate the discourse of Promise Keepers in charging men with the care and authority of the household. At the same time the Nicolosis note with sadness that even when parents are apprised of the parenting strategies necessary to intervene and prevent same-sex orientation in a child, it is the mother who often takes responsibility for performing them rather than the irreplaceable father (2002:30).

A final recent example of the narrative of development is Anne Paulk’s Restoring Sexual Identity: Hope for Women Who Struggle with Same-Sex Identity. Paulk, who is active in Focus on the Family’s Love Won Out ministry, bases her account of lesbian development on her personal contacts with ex-lesbians and lesbian strugglers, and on a year 2000 survey of same-sex attracted women she distributed through Exodus International referral ministries. Leaving aside here the problems raised by Paulk’s reliance on her survey of ex-lesbians and aspiring ex-lesbians, Paulk both follows and departs from the contemporary model of a Christian right narrative of development. She follows the model by offering a compassionate account of lesbian strugglers and by identifying herself when it is appropriate with these strugglers. She also challenges the scientific studies that, for some, provide support for the immutability of homosexual desire (Paulk 2003:36-47). However, unlike many narratives of development, Paulk’s contribution does not have the virtue of consistency. Instead of telling a consistent story about the developmental processes that are likely to culminate in lesbian desire, Paulk borrows liberally from a number of developmental—and other—scripts. So, for example, unavailable or narcissistic mothers and unavailable or (sexually) abusive fathers, seduction by girls or women, gender non-normative behaviour, and positive portrayals of same-sex sexuality in schools and the media are treated alike as possible causes of lesbian attraction.

However confusing the developmental trajectory that Paulk presents, central to her book is her personal and professional commitment to the well-being and flourishing of women who ‘struggle with same-sex attraction’. Paulk and other writers in this genre are stem about the conservative Christian precepts concerning gender, marriage, family, and sexuality. But their attitude to those struggling with same-sex sexuality is neither harsh nor punitive. For those, like Paulk, who once identified as gay or lesbian, the sympathy and compassion for gender non-normative young people and for adults who work to resist their own same-sex sexuality is palpable. Such developmental accounts may be flawed, theologically determined, and prejudicial. The compassion projected and aroused by the narrative of development may not extend to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people who refuse to resist their same-sex sexuality, and the compassion generated within such a narrative may be deployed cynically against the interests of a wide range of sexual minorities; nevertheless, it remains
important for critics of the Christian right to understand the ways in which narratives of development and expressions of compassion can operate as political strategy, cannot be reduced to political strategy, and may disrupt other forms of Christian right political work.

The Political Work of Compassion

One consistent feature of the conservative Christian literature on the developmental basis of same-sex sexuality is that authors in the genre urge compassion for the pain that same-sex sexuality inflicts. Granted, some of this compassion is for the parents of prehomosexual children. But compassion is also urged toward children who, through no fault of their own, must cope with gender and sexual injury and for adult "strugglers"—those who ask God to help them confront their same-sex desire and behaviour. Some authors are more successful than others in projecting compassion for the plight of adult strugglers, but compassion remains a central dimension of the developmental project. In this narrative, the fault of same-sex desire does not lie in the wounded themselves, but in their histories, and particularly in their family relations. Hence, the narrative contains a powerful indictment of many Christian families even when it denies that families are to blame. At the same time, it relieves homosexually-afflicted people of responsibility for their condition, although it charges them with what they make of these conditions—most notably the choice to avoid or act upon same-sex desire.

When they undertake to respond to the Christian right, lesbians, gay men, and their political allies do not always appreciate the compassionate dimensions of the narrative of development. Indeed, it is not uncommon for queer activists and intellectuals to reject and/or deride the very idea that anything about the conservative Christian antigay agenda can be compassionate. However, in order to understand the totality of Christian right politics, it is as necessary to disarticulate political projects and their ideological foundations from one another as it is to analyse collectively these projects and their effects. One piece of literature that is critical of the Christian right's ex-gay movement helps to illustrate this problem. In 1998, Political Research Associates (PRA), the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), and Equal Partners in Faith jointly sponsored a report on the ex-gay movement. Rigorously researched and written by Surina Khan of PRA, 'Calculated Compassion: How the Ex-Gay Movement Serves the Right's Attack on Democracy', explains the movement and its connections to the broader antigay agenda of the Christian right.

Khan concludes that the ex-gay movement 'lends political cover to the right's hostile political campaign against gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people' by helping the right to reframe its 'attack on homosexuality in kinder, gentler terms' (Khan 1998:2). This is a trenchant account of how the Christian right has functioned politically, especially since the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it overlooks two important distinctions. First, such a conclusion does not distinguish
the ex-gay movement as a whole (including the psychotherapeutic ideas on which the ex-gay movement relies) from the 1998 media campaign coordinated by prominent Christian right organisations. In July of that year, fifteen organisations purchased a series of full-page adverts in the Washington Post (July 14, 1998), New York Times (July 15), USA Today (July 15), and Washington Times (July 15). The adverts in mainstream newspapers, entitled ‘Truth in Love’, claimed success for reparative therapies in converting homosexuals into heterosexuals, and carried a message of religious redemption. The ‘Reggie White/In Defense of Free Speech’ advert was published in the Washington Times and took an aggressive rhetorical stance toward the ‘activist homosexual lobby’ (Focus on the Family 1998). This media campaign was undeniably politically strategic and those who executed it can rightfully be accused of ‘calculated compassion’. However, it obscures our political understanding to collapse such a media spectacle with the movement and the therapeutic literature from which the public campaign ostensibly springs.

Tanya Erzin recently concluded a study of the ex-gay movement that consisted in part of ethnographic fieldwork at New Hope, the first residential ex-gay ministry, founded in 1973. Erzin points out that at the time of the 1998 ex-gay advert campaign many ex-gay participants at New Hope regretted the association between the movement and the larger scope of Christian right antigay politics. Many disapproved of the way in which the advert campaign and other Christian right political initiatives pushed the idea of a ‘radical homosexual conspiracy’. These ex-gays were ‘sympathetic to gay rights’ and believed that they and their movement were being used as compassionate cover for the more punitive parts of the Christian right agenda (Erzin 2004:127-31). As this critique suggests, Erzin contributes to our understanding of the disjunctions within Christian right politics by highlighting the conflicts between many ex-gays in the movement and the political leaders of large Christian right organisations. She also confirms that different sectors of the Christian right have borrowed and relied upon the narrative of development and its association with compassion for (ex) gays and their families.

Ethnographic attention to the ex-gay movement suggests that it may be hazardous to assume the perfect coordination of the internal operation of even this one segment of Christian right antigay politics. However, one key to understanding the internal dynamics of Christian right antigay politics may be taking seriously diverse conceptualisations of the origins of same-sex sexuality. In fact, the PRA report on the ex-gay movement simultaneously highlights and neglects this important distinction. In different sections of the report, Khan points out that the ex-gay movement treats homosexuality as a ‘lifestyle choice’ (a ‘voluntary lifestyle choice’, in the words of the Executive Summary) and as ‘caused by childhood circumstances’. It is certainly not impossible for a movement to be actuated by two quite different beliefs about the source of a social problem. But it is more accurate to say that the ex-gay movement (as opposed to other political projects of the Christian right) has been constructed through a narrative of development than that it is grounded in a narrative
of choice. If this is so, and taking into account the deep sense of betrayal that some ‘ex-gays’, ‘strugglers’, and their allies felt during the 1998 ‘Love Won Out’ media blitz, it is inaccurate to conclude that Christian right politics as a whole employ a ‘mask of compassion’. It is better to work with the assumption that compassion is itself a contested dimension of Christian right politics. This does not obviate the possibility that compassion, tolerance, and democratic rights discourse are used strategically as packaging for antidemocratic forms of antigay politics. And it does not require us to agree with the conception of compassion that is at play. But it does encourage us to judge these projects in the full knowledge of the affective and theological commitments of their proponents.

One way to judge what is at stake in divergent formulations of the origins of same-sex desire and sexuality and the politics of compassion is to listen in on the conversations of parties to the debate. A recent Family Research Report published by Paul Cameron’s Family Research Institute is revealing. In this issue, Paul’s son Kirk Cameron highlights the disagreement between antigay critics who concede that same-sex sexuality is developmental and those who deny the existence of such a developmental sequence. Citing James Dobson’s leadership in the ‘pro-family movement’, and noting that Dobson ‘ought to know better’, Kirk Cameron refers to Dobson’s comments in a March, 2002, segment of Larry King Live and passages in Bringing Up Boys to demonstrate Dobson’s dangerous infatuation with a developmental explanation of same-sex sexuality. Considering Dobson and the Nicolosis together, Cameron denounces the developmental arguments as ‘Freudian’ and suggests this substitute thesis: ‘homosexuality is a choice’, ‘it is about rebelling against and trying to corrupt society’. And Cameron reverses the causal direction suggested by developmental arguments: ‘while we would not deny that “loneliness, rejection, self-hatred, and a search for belonging” are part of the price for rebellion, these are not the fundamental causes of homosexual behaviour, but instead some of its consequences’ (Cameron 2002).

How helpful is such a dispute between those who represent a narrative of development and those who insist on a narrative of choice for homosexuality? As the Camerons obviously know, invocations of unchosen desire or orientation have the potential to produce compassion for those who bear benighted same-sex desires. And in fact, the Family Research Report attack on Dobson expresses anxiety about this potential outcome. Kirk Cameron repeatedly works to preempt compassion for the putative injustices visited on lesbians, gay men, and transsexuals by sampling stories of antigay incidents from Washington, DC’s Washington Blade newspaper and creating counter-narratives that position the queer ‘victims’ either as ‘victimisers’ or as recipients of appropriate consequences. His rhetorical questions — ‘how is [sexual exhibitionism] to be explained by familial child-rearing practices?’ ‘Are we really to feel sorry for [a man caught in a police sting operation]?’ ‘But isn’t this the kind of tragedy that one would expect to visit the rebellious...?’ — clarify Cameron’s interest in foreclosing any possibility that a developmental argument can be used to underwrite empathy for homosexuals.
On the farther edge of the Christian and political continuum, Kansas minister Fred Phelps brings the repudiation of compassion evident in Cameron’s debate with Dobson to a logical conclusion. Phelps has a national reputation for ambitious antigay bigotry. His activism includes picketing the funerals of AIDS and hate crime victims and gatherings such as those of Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) with signs that read ‘God Hates Fags’, ‘Fag Enablers’, and ‘God Is Not Mocked’. Phelps’ Westboro Baptist Church website is replete with explicit antigay sentiments and images, including gay murder victim Matthew Shepard’s face enveloped in the dancing flames of hell. Phelps also rejects the compassionate approach to same-sex sexual sin advocated by many Christian conservatives who subscribe to the narrative of development. Disparaging compassion, Phelps’ message to members of PFLAG who met in Salt Lake City, Utah in October, 2004 is: ‘God hates PFLAG and the filthy fag/dyke kids PFLAG encourages to continue in vile lives of sin, shame, misery, disease, death, and Hell’ (Phelps, 2004). Phelps may not speak for the Christian right, but he does highlight for all of us both the similarities and the distinctions that often are elided by binary political pros and antis.

Always unstable in its political effects, compassion can undermine the message that homosexuals are unregenerately evil corruptors of society and manipulators of a democratic political system. This is just the effect the Camerons hope to subvert by insisting on the rebellious and contemptuous nature of homosexual choices and behaviours. However, just as compassion can have this ‘liberal’ effect, it can also perform another kind of conservative political work. Compassion can work to shore up support for ‘mainstream’ antigay initiatives by assuaging the suspicion that these programmes are driven by group-related bias or defended by arguments that are pretexts for bias. In this way, compassion helps to ‘centre’ cultural and political actors (Smith 1994; Smith 1997; Burack 2003).

Much has been written in recent years about the effective co-opting of left politics and issues by the American political right and the dubious ‘centring’ of right-wing political culture. Critics such as Angela Dillard (2001) and Didi Herman (1997) trace the transformation of such lynchpins of the Left as the Civil Rights Movement and rights-based political discourse. Others, such as Amy Ansell (2001), and Anna Marie Smith (1994, 2001) reconstruct the rightward shift of the political center since the end of the Cold War. Nor have students of American politics ignored ‘compassion’ as a legitimating factor in political discourse, if not in actual policy. Critics have concentrated on the ideals, pretensions, and illusions of so-called ‘compassionate conservatism’ and have criticised President George W Bush’s claim to any such label (Campbell 2003:113-126). It would be inadequate to dismiss compassionate conservatism as mere public relations both because of the complex ways in which such an understanding can do its work and because of its devastating political consequences. The right-wing claim on compassion is a culmination of the right’s coopting of left political projects in combination with the construction of a new kind of ‘centrist’ political identity.
Compassion has a utility for the political projects of the right, including the Christian right. In what follows we trace some ways in which the compassion for homosexuals that often is explicit in the narrative of development provides foundations for Christian right advocacy in relation to LGBT issues affecting youth and addressing the needs of family members and friends of LGBT people. On the other hand, critics of the right may inappropriately impute instrumental motivations to right-wing political actors. Not all political formations rest upon self-consciously laid foundational assumptions, rhetorics, and practices. The factors that gave rise to a narrative of development are no doubt multi-determined and include anxieties about parenting in an age of changing social mores and enhanced parental responsibility for the character development of children (Lehr 2003:135-36). It is indisputable that proponents of a narrative of development wish to stigmatise and prevent same-sex sexuality. Yet the narrative provides support for contemporary political projects even as it is not exhausted by the uses to which it may be put in those projects.

PFLAG and PFOX

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays was formed in the early 1970s by parents who supported their self-identified lesbian or gay children. PFLAG has a national office and more than four hundred local affiliate chapters; its policy-making process is grassroots and representatives; policy changes are approved through a process of elections and referendums. PFLAG’s current mission statement includes three elements: supporting LGBT people and their families and friends, educating society about LGBT people and issues, and advocating for social and political inclusion. Local chapters are required to provide a local ‘helpline’ and hold meetings that provide opportunities for information-sharing and discussion by members and new attendees.

As part of its educational mission, PFLAG produces informational brochures for different audiences. Brochures like ‘Our Daughters and Sons’ and ‘Be Yourself: Questions and Answers for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth’ Read this before Coming Out to your Parents’ are written in a question and answer format. They are intended to help parents and LGBT young people reflect on issues related to how a family member’s sexual orientation will affect family relationships. PFLAG materials for parents emphasise that parents are not ‘to blame’ for their children’s sexual orientation. These materials also emphasise that being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is normal for some people just as being heterosexual is normal for other people. Early PFLAG materials offered the analogy of the stages of grief for parents trying to understand and come to terms with their children’s sexual orientation. Newer materials emphasise that parents might have a variety of reactions to their children’s sexual orientation, and that the ‘stages of grief’—grieving for the parents’ expectations of their children’s heterosexual lives—might not fit all parents’ responses to a child’s same-sex sexual orientation.
At one time, PFLAG had a policy statement that refuted the idea that sexual orientation is a choice. During the 1990s PFLAG retracted this position in favour of a statement that indicates that the etiology of sexual orientation is some combination of nature and nurture. Here is ‘Our Daughters And Sons’:

For years, psychology and psychiatry have bandied around theories that homosexuality is caused by parental personality types—the dominant female, the weak male—or by the absence of same-gender role models. Those theories are no longer accepted within psychiatry and psychology, and part of PFLAG’s work focuses on erasing these myths and misconceptions from our popular culture. Gay people come from all types of families. (PFLAG 1995:7)

PFLAG’s position today is that the cause of same-sex sexuality is not important. The organisation refocuses attention on how discrimination harms LGBT people and their families.

Many parents wonder if there is a genetic or biological basis to homosexuality. While there are some studies on homosexuality and genetics, there are no conclusive studies to date on the ‘cause’ of homosexuality. In the absence of this data, we would encourage you to ask yourself why it is important for you to know why. Does support or love for your child rely on your ability to point to a cause? Do we ask heterosexual people to justify their sexuality that way?... Although we may be curious, it is really not that important to know why your child is gay in order to support and love him or her. (1995:8)

The purpose of PFLAG is to help people cope with the harms that gay people suffer and to try to eliminate discrimination through education and advocacy.

Parents and Friends of Ex-gays and Gays (PFOX) is the ex-gay movement’s answer to PFLAG. PFOX is a support group for parents who wish to alter, rather than to support or affirm, their children’s LGBT identity. On its website, PFOX ‘support[s] the right of homosexuals and lesbians to change’. The group’s mission statement includes the goals of educating the public about ex-gay men and women, and supporting the ‘ex-gay community’ and ‘those families whose lives have been affected by homosexuality’. PFOX also has a brochure for youth, as well as a brochure entitled ‘Can Sexual Orientation Change?’, but the contents are very different from those distributed by PFLAG. The teen brochure prominently features a narrative of development and rejects immutability by emphasising that being gay or lesbian is not genetic, and that there is no gay gene and no single biological explanation for gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexual orientation. The brochure for teens appeals with hip prose: ‘Feelings Change. They are only one part of you! Get Smart! Get the Facts!’ It continues inside, ‘if only one part of you has gay feelings, should your whole life be gay identified?’

‘Can Sexual Orientation Change?’ provides ‘facts’ regarding sexual orientation, including citations to the American Psychological Association. Ignoring the position of the American Psychological Association and other
professional organisations, the brochure disingenuously notes that APA members 'support sexual reorientation'. The text that follows includes quotations from Robert Spitzer, Warren Throckmorton, Raymond Fowler, Martin Sellgren, and Douglas Haldeman. The brochure also helpfully provides definitions of several terms, including 'sexual orientation' and 'transgender'. Sexual orientation is defined as 'a combination of sexual attractions/feelings and behaviour associated with those feelings. It is a developmental process not genetically determined' (emphasis added). A transgender person is 'someone whose gender identity or expression differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex' and concludes, 'This is a gender identity disorder [GID]' (emphasis in original). The brochure also lists a series of heightened health risks for 'homosexual and bisexual behaviour'.

'Can Sexual Orientation Change' recommends 'reorientation therapy' that 'supports people's objective to change their orientation from gay or bisexual to straight'. The Executive Director of PFOX affirms the organisation's position regarding the treatment of teens who have same-sex attractions:

- teenagers' same sex attractions do not automatically mean that they are homosexual. Many teens go through temporary episodes of idealization of same-sex peers and should not be urged to prematurely label themselves as gay. For those teens who do actually suffer gender-identity confusion, we support the availability of gender affirming therapy (Griggs 2003).

This brief statement includes a simplified developmental model of same-sex sexuality, a repudiation of same-sex sexual identity, and a recommendation to parents of a therapeutic fix for non-conforming teens.

That the ex-gay movement insists upon the congruence between gender identity and sexuality is well known by critics. Indeed, the simplicity of this gender equals sexuality equation is virtually a pop-culture joke. It is the running gag of the 1999 film, But I'm a Cheerleader— a film in which teenage hostages in an ex-gay academy are subjected to campy training in gender-linked forms of dress, deportment, and activities (Babbit 1999). In Cheerleader, the parodied pedagogy fails and the young people end up in sinful pairs. In real life, ex-gay experts continue to highlight the risks of gender nonconformity for anxious parents and then prescribe gender stereotypes for sexual healing. PFOX also provides materials and recommends therapy for transgender-identifying teens to reorient them to their correct gender and sexual orientation. Conversely, the PFLAG informational brochure on transgender issues, 'Our Trans Children' provides a description of the DSM category, 'gender identity disorder' that indicates that, while GID is 'the only diagnosis under which trans people may receive treatment' it has also been 'used inappropriately and harmfully by some psychotherapists to treat gender variant youth' (PFLAG 1999).

Like other parts of the ex-gay movement, PFOX uses a compassionate developmental narrative to persuade adolescents to repudiate same-sex attraction and to persuade parents to reject their children's same-sex sexual
identity. In addition, the Christian right uses GiD in its narrative of development to reconcile its goal of preventing children from becoming gay with the practices of the medical community. Materials produced by Focus on the Family and many Christian talk radio call programmes across the country, counsel teens and their parents on how to address LGBT tendencies and identities in youth through interventions and reorientation therapies. The message is that if LGBT identity is arrested early enough, it is possible to intervene to prevent its consolidation.

The Focus on the Family web site features a series of informational brochures in the series, ‘Helping Boys Become Men, and Girls Become Women’. This series provides information for parents about when to be concerned about their children’s possible ‘prehomosexuality’ and how and when to intervene. While parents need not be concerned about gender inappropriate behaviours in preschool children, children aged five to eleven may exhibit behaviours that should trigger parental intervention (Focus on the Family 2004). What is more, the brochures instruct parents how to intervene. As the Nicolosi’s emphasise, fathers need to act to teach their sons how to be men. Spouses with a troubled marriage are urged to get marriage counselling to help their children become heterosexual. And single mothers should ‘recruit a trustworthy male role model’. Parents should take care to consult a psychologist who believes in the possibility of sexual conversion, which is to say one whose practices do not reside in the therapeutic mainstream. The brochure includes contact information for Exodus International and NARTH as sources for ‘a qualified therapist’.

PFOX responds to the gay affirmative ideology of PFLAG with developmental narratives that support sexual reorientation in adult children. Similar narratives undergird Christian right activism against Safe Schools programmes. At stake is the ability to absolve children of their sexual feelings, to hold adults responsible for preventing the formation of LGBT identity, as well as to stigmatise same-sex sexuality.

**Safe Schools**

A second arena where the discourse of development provides foundations for Christian right social and political activism is in battles over ‘safe schools’. The Safe Schools movement consists of programmes across the US geared to address sexual orientation-based discrimination and harassment in schools. These programmes have been implemented in part due to the advocacy work done by gay rights and other civil rights organisations, including PFLAG, The Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN), The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. Christian right organisations such as the Family Research Council (FRC), Concerned Women for America (CWA), and the American Family Association (AFA) oppose Safe Schools programmes. These groups urge their supporters at the state and local levels to fight programmes that teach faculty or other school staff how to stop antigay harassment, support tolerance for LGBT youth, or address the needs of these youth.
One problem with the opposition of Christian right advocates to Safe Schools work is that it appears to defend bullying in schools. Such a position certainly does not comport with the idea of compassion, and it appears to conflict with Christian ethics. Christian right advocates respond to this charge by clarifying that bullying is wrong but that opposition to bullying, and school policies to address bullying, need not specifically address sexual orientation. They rely upon a developmental narrative to argue that addressing sexual orientation is a way for Safe Schools advocates to promote homosexuality. If talking about sex is tantamount to promoting sexual activity, as opponents of comprehensive sex education programmes suggest, talking about LGBT people in the context of Safe Schools programmes is tantamount to promoting homosexuality to children (Irvine 2002). More, any assumption that some teenagers are or may become lesbian, gay, or bisexual reifies sexual identity instead of compassionately challenging or treating it. For conservative Christian activists, opposing LGBT advocacy for Safe Schools is a major grassroots strategy, and many national organisations have produced anti-Safe Schools materials for local activists to use in their communities (Josephson 2003:173-87).

In spite of concerted activism, not all opposition to Safe Schools is successful. Conservative Christian opposition to Safe Schools programmes is more difficult in states where civil rights or school safety codes include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories. In California, the school code was changed in 2002 to include specific protection for discrimination based on sexual orientation. There, Christian conservatives have tried to ensure that parents who are opposed to the inclusion of sexual orientation in school policies can withdraw their children from any instruction that includes mention of sexual orientation (Pacific Justice Institute 2000). In New Jersey, where sexual orientation is a protected category in the state civil rights law, the state Division of Civil Rights issued a ruling in 2004 that indicates that school districts may be held liable if they do not take explicit steps to comprehensively address and prevent sexual orientation based harassment, even if they address individual incidents of harassment when they are reported to the school (LW and LG v Toms River Regional Schools Board of Education 2004). By contrast, in states where there are no such provisions, political arguments grounded in a narrative of development are often more successful. One strategy that Christian groups have used in relation to Safe Schools projects is to produce their own materials, and then to urge local activists to argue for equal time in schools for their position. If a school plans to show the film It's Elementary (Chasnoff and Cohen, 1996) for a teacher's training, the Christian conservative advocates can argue that their own film, It’s Not Gay, (American Family Association, 2000) should also be shown to ensure ‘balance’ and ‘fairness’ in presentation of views about homosexuality. In cases like these, the use of a civil rights framework to gain a hearing for the Christian right viewpoint does not invalidate the developmental narrative that underlies it. In its hope for healing and its refutation of settled homosexual identity, the narrative of development
can motivate a variety of political strategies, depending on the circumstances that prevail.

The message of compassion, and the narrative of development in which it is nested, resonates more clearly when the issue at hand concerns LGBT youth rather than adults. This is especially true given the common anxiety that lesbian and gay adults recruit youth into their lifestyle. A narrative of development also speaks to the tentative and emerging nature of all adolescent sexuality and sexual identity. The PFOX brochure for youth speaks to the fact that LGB teens might identify their same-sex attractions or feelings without necessarily acting on those feelings, telling young people that their feelings need not be their identity. Christian conservatives argue that it is more compassionate to provide reorientation therapy and ensure that LGB youth do not act on their same-sex attractions than to support or affirm their LGB identity. In this way, they can be saved from the homosexual lifestyle and live lives in keeping with God's will for sexuality. For Christian conservatives, celibacy and sexual reorientation come recommended as alternatives to a homosexual lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

When they develop and deploy a narrative of development, Christian conservatives contest the idea of 'identity' even as they acknowledge identity-like processes. From this perspective, it is appropriate for compassionate adults to acknowledge the sexual feelings and gender patterns of young people who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. However, neither compassion nor an understanding of the many influences on sexual attraction authorise accepting and legitimising these feelings and patterns as sexual orientation or identity. At the centre of a variety of antigay Christian social and political positions is the conviction that sexual identity is not a settled fact beyond God's power to heal. As Dobson puts it, 'Prevention is effective. Change is possible. Hope is available' (Dobson 2001:117). Sexual minority and other tolerant adults put young people—and those adults who wish to change their sexual orientation—at risk by insisting upon the legitimacy and/or immutability of same-sex sexuality. Of course, to conservative Christians, gay activists bear an overwhelming portion of the blame for this risk because of their reputed disproportionate influence on social attitudes and political processes.

It is no doubt true that much antigay thought and activism is the fruit of deeply-rooted biases that are widely shared within affinity groups such as the conservative Christian right. However, there is no reason to believe that the sexual disgust and revulsion that many feel toward LGBT people cannot coexist with compassion and a developmental explication of same-sex sexuality. Indeed, many conservative Christians may understand both their feelings of sexual disgust and their willingness to extend compassion to those who inspire it as divine mandates on the issue of same-sex sexuality. It will do little good to remind social and political actors so inspired of the warnings so forcefully enunciated by such
philosophers as John Stuart Mill against reading our own feelings as indicators of some reality external to ourselves.

What this suggests is that the purpose of investigating the political narratives, strategies, and rhetoric of various Christian right projects is not to persuade these political adversaries of the wrongness of their cause. Rather, the purpose is to understand the complexities of Christian right political projects: their constitution from diverse, and sometimes contradictory, motivations and from complex combinations of affect, theology, and political strategy. Important tasks for critics of Christian right projects are distinguishing political strategies, including the deployment of compassion and rights talk, from genealogies of affective and theological commitment. Even if it is never possible to disarticulate these strands of meaning and motivation completely, we understand the Christian right as a social and political movement best when we try.

LGBT scholars and their allies can also investigate how compassion works through narratives that conservative Christians tell themselves. Like identification, compassion and empathy do not have only one shape. Compassion can select and construct its objects with great flexibility. For example, we may take not only very specific others as objects of our compassion but also ourselves. Indeed, this is in one important respect what the narrative of same-sex sexual development does: it 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 and young people who dread the dismay of their parents, friends, and religious communities become the objects of compassion that narratives of development serve. That these narratives also protect these particular objects by vividly contrasting them with the unredeemed and unregenerate should not surprise us. However, as the conflict between James Dobson and Kirk Cameron reveal, the two conservative Christian narratives of homosexual origins do not just quietly coexist. Even if outside critics do not call attention to their seams and contradictions, the narratives threaten to undermine each other. The narrative of choice can devastate the hopes and aspirations of conservative Christians with same-sex attractions and those who dedicate themselves to helping them. The narrative of development can foster compassion (or pity or social toleration) toward those whom conservative Christians believe it would be better to punish. Neither of these origin stories is entirely a political strategy. But to the extent that both narratives are political strategies, it is well to remember that they continue to make both benefits and trouble for those who produce them.

NOTES

1. There is some variation in the ways that scholars treat this question of origins. For example, Mary E. Wood (2000) ignores the narrative of development in favor of an analysis of the Christian right’s emphasis on narratives of choice and biology.
Rather than concentrating exclusively on the Christian right rejection of arguments for biological immutability, she highlights the points of similarity between Christian antigay discourse and scientific discourses related to evolutionary biology and nineteenth century sexology.

2. The extent to which immutability is embraced varies widely, from its replacement in some quarters by human rights arguments to its continued viability for many individual lesbians and gay men who are not active in the LGBT civil rights movement.

3. For more detail about the ways in which a narrative of development is actively deployed in the ex-gay movement, see our account of a Focus on the Family-sponsored ex-gay conference, ‘A Report from “Love Won Out: Addressing, Understanding and Preventing Homosexuality”’, forthcoming from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

4. For one perspective on the Paulk affair and the ex-gay movement, see Wayne Besen (2003). For a critique of Dr. Spitzer’s research, see Robinson (2002).

5. There are exceptions. See, e.g., Thomas Schmidt’s claim that parents of children who refuse to renounce their same-sex sexuality should accept ‘a proper measure of guilt [to] foster humility and sensitivity’ (Schmidt 1995:169).

6. We use the term ‘ex-gays’ to refer to these residents and movement participants because it is the identity term that they embrace. According to Erez, ‘ex-gay identity... is constantly in flux and incorporates the idea of sexual falls and subsequent redemption’ (2004:132).


8. This anxiety about the same-sex seduction of children by adults is usually aimed at gay men. However, it is interesting to note that some of the same concern circulates around the seduction of girls by other girls and by older women. In her recent book, Anne Paulk finds that 17% of her sample of ex-lesbians reported being molested by a female, a category that includes babysitters, mothers, sisters, family friends, and church leaders. Paulk’s definition of sexual molestation is as follows: ‘Any kind of sexual interchange between a child and anyone bigger, stronger, or older, from inappropriate touching to kissing, contact with another’s genitals, also (sic) includes exposure to another’s genitals, exposure to pornographic materials, or use of child to make pornographic materials (may or may not include vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse)’ (Paulk 2003: 246-47).

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