

The Country is Going to Hell:
Conservative Christian Groups Use of Chaos Rhetoric as the Root of American Aversion to
Same-Sex Marriage

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Introduction

Throughout my studies as a Religion major at Colgate, I have become increasingly fascinated with the role that religious communities play in constructing individual morality. Additionally, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I have long had an interest in how politically conservative Americans' positions on same-sex marriage and homosexuality are shaped by religion. To more closely explore the influence that religion has in debates around same-sex marriage, my last project analyzed evangelicals' use of the Bible as a proof text to refute the morality of same-sex marriage.¹ The study was driven primarily by my observation that evangelicals maintained strong opposition to same-sex marriage in comparison to other religious denominations in the United States such as Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and those identifying as religiously unaffiliated, all of whom have grown significantly in their approval of same-sex marriage over the years. To explore the persistence of evangelical aversion to same-sex marriage, I decided to home in on evangelicals' most defining tenets, biblical authority and biblical literalism. Both of these terms are primarily understood as the way in which individuals interpret and attach legitimacy to biblical textual claims and then use them to justify how the world around them should appear.² I chose to focus on these two tenets because they distinguish evangelicals from other Christians who as a whole do not interpret the Bible strictly as the literal word of God, and therefore, do not rely on the Bible as heavily for sources of moral authority. Ultimately, I concluded that the evangelical focus on biblical authority and biblical literalism was the primary reason for their continual disapproval of same-sex marriage in the United States.

¹ Joseph Liu, "Religion and Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, August 06, 2013, Accessed October 20, 2018.

² Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Church Documents on Human Sexuality and the Authority of Scripture," *Interpretation* 49 no. 1 (1995): 46-58.

The conclusion that biblical literalism and authority was the root of evangelical aversion towards same-sex marriage was further elevated in my previous project by my use of Saba Mahmood's theory of positive ethics. Positive ethics understands ethics as action.³ It claims that individuals' actions are results of their "relationship to a moral code."⁴ However, individuals do not construct their own moral code contingently but rather build one based upon the "relationship that is established between the self and structures" of authority.⁵ Applying Mahmood's theory to evangelicalism, one can observe how evangelicals construct their own moral codes from the relational authority they place upon biblical texts. In simpler terms, biblical verses provide evangelicals and other biblical literalists clear ideas of right and wrong. Ultimately, these individuals' actions and beliefs are shaped and molded by what biblical verses instruct or condemn. This mirroring of biblical conceptualizations of right and wrong can be seen in evangelical discourse that often cites biblical verses as evidence for certain moral beliefs and positions. Therefore, whether or not homosexuality and same-sex marriage is morally wrong is not a matter of debate among a majority of evangelicals who identify as biblical literalists. To these individuals, the Bible speaks clearly to the immorality of homosexuality and same-sex marriage in popularly cited verses such as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, The Story of Sodom, and Romans 1:24-28.

Although it is a natural move to look to biblical literalism as the primary cause for aversion to same-sex marriage among United States citizens, an analysis of U.S. religious demographics suggests there is something else driving their general disapproval. Straying away from my previous research and studying religious demographics in the United States, the data

³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton University Press, 2011), 120.

⁴ Ibid, 120.

⁵ Ibid, 120.

reveals a small, homogeneous, and fairly regionally isolated percentage of individuals who identify as evangelical Protestants. With such small and limited representation, it is misleading to believe that evangelical tenets of biblical authority and biblical literalism have the influence and power to dissuade nearly half of the U.S. population from favoring same-sex marriage. Diving into the numbers, the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study performed in 2014 found that 25% of the United States' population identifies as evangelical Protestants and only 55% of these evangelical Protestants identify as biblical literalists.⁶ When these numbers are calculated out with the numbers of the total United States' population, only 12.5 million consider themselves biblical literalists, totaling to roughly 3% of the total population. Additionally, this group of individuals are defined by percentages that support their main tenet of biblical authority with 63% who read scripture at least once a week, 60% who use religion to determine what is right and wrong, and 55% who interpret the Bible literally as the word of God.⁷ Furthermore, those who identify as evangelical Protestants are largely concentrated in five states: Kentucky, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Arkansas.⁸ Additionally, the identified cohort is incredibly homogenous, primarily composed of two different age ranges, ages 30-49 and 50-64, and an astounding 76% are white, leaving Latinos/as as the second highest ethnicity at 11%.⁹ In conclusion, evangelical Protestants make up a very small percentage of the United States population, are relatively regionally isolated, and are not ethnically diverse. With such limited representation and reach, it is difficult to assume that biblical literalism and authority are the

⁶“Evangelical Protestants - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), Accessed April 6, 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

primary source of aversion to same-sex marriage in a largely disapproving, religiously moderate United States population.

These numbers leave a 75% majority of the U.S. population that does not identify as evangelical Protestant. The rest of the population is divided into other religious demographics, including Catholics, mainline Protestants, non-Christian faiths, and the religiously unaffiliated. When breaking down their numbers, the second largest by percentage of population are the religiously unaffiliated, who make up 22.3%.¹⁰ Catholics fall third behind them, making up 20.8%, followed by Mainline Protestants at 14.7%, and Non-Christian faiths at 5.9%.¹¹ Overall, a majority of these groups do not identify as biblical literalists and reflect little regard for scripture or religion as sources of moral authority. For example, only 25% of Catholics read scripture at least once a week and 52% seldom or never read scripture. Additionally, only 30% claim to use religion as a source for right and wrong with 48% utilizing common sense instead and only 26% of Catholics believe scripture should be interpreted literally as the word of God.¹² Similarly with Mainline Protestants, only 29% utilize religion as a source of right and wrong, 44% read scripture seldom or never, and only 24% believe scripture should be taken literally as the word of God.¹³ Lastly, and not surprisingly, those who identify as religiously unaffiliated reflect the largest indifference to biblical authority in comparison to evangelical Protestants. Only 9% of the religiously unaffiliated read scripture at least once a week in comparison to 79% who read it seldom to never.¹⁴ A meager 7% use religion as a source of guidance when gauging right and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Catholics - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), Accessed April 25, 2020a.

¹³ “Mainline Protestants - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), Accessed April 25, 2020b.

¹⁴ “The Unaffiliated - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), Accessed April 25, 2020.

wrong, whereas 57% use common sense and 72% believe the Bible is not the word of God with only 10% believing it is.¹⁵ In conclusion, the numbers represent an American majority that does not identify as biblical literalists, does not rely heavily on religion for moral guidance, and does not consult scripture often in day to day life.

However, it is important to include those Americans who identify as biblical literalists but do not consider themselves evangelical Protestants in the total numbers of biblical literalists within the U.S. population. My previous work's conclusion would work similarly for these individuals. If they read the Bible literally and, therefore, rely heavily on the Bible for sources of moral authority, then their identity as a biblical literalist is what most likely drives their aversion to same-sex marriage. Even with the addition of the individuals who identify as biblical literalists but do not identify as evangelical Protestants, there still remains roughly 76% of the population that does not read the Bible literally as the word of God and 75% who seek sources other than religion for moral guidance. If we accept biblical literalism as the primary cause for disapproval of same-sex marriage among the entire United States population then we should expect roughly 75% of American citizens who do not identify as biblical literalists to approve of same-sex marriage. However, in 2014 when the Religious Landscape study was performed, the approval rate of same-sex marriage was only at 52% among the entire U.S. population.¹⁶ Where then is the missing 24% of individuals that should be, based upon these numbers and my previous conclusion, approving of or indifferent to the legalization of same-sex marriage? And, if their aversion to same-sex marriage cannot be attributed to biblical literalism, what then is the cause of it?

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Changing Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), Accessed April 25, 2020.

In this thesis, I argue that the general aversion towards homosexuality among the United States population is not a result of biblical literalism but is the result of popular conservative Christian groups' heavy use of what Leslie Dorrough Smith terms "chaos rhetoric." To advance this argument, I first complicate biblical literalism and its influences on moral debates of same-sex marriage by rejecting the notion that the Bible provides a clear condemnation of homosexuality. Further problematizing biblical literalism, I question why certain biblical issues, such as adultery, are less salient in the realms of U.S. social, political, and religious moral debates when they are condemned more directly and more frequently in the Bible than issues of homosexuality. Following this discussion, I define Smith's concept of chaos rhetoric, focusing primarily on its most defining characteristics of moral authority, emotional and persuasive appeal, secular appearance, and malleability to different socio-historical circumstances. Lastly, I analyze reports written and published by the Family Research Council, highlighting this group's use of chaos rhetoric to reach and persuade a largely non-religious audience to sympathize with its largely religious platforms. I conclude that the use of chaos rhetoric by conservative Christian groups is the primary reason for the 26% gap of individuals who did not identify as biblical literalists but still exemplified a moral aversion to same-sex marriage in the United States in 2014.

The Problem with Biblical Literalism

Biblical Authority

Biblical authority is primarily understood as the way in which individuals attach legitimacy to biblical textual claims and use them to justify how the world around them should be structured.¹⁷

¹⁷ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Church Documents on Human Sexuality and the Authority of Scripture," *Interpretation* 49 no. 1 (1995): 46-58.

It is relational, meaning its authority impacts individuals in different ways. Some individuals attach less authority and others attach more, depending upon their perspective on the truth values of the text. For example, a secular professor of religion might look at the Bible as “fine literature,” whereas a biblical literalist uses the Bible to frame the entire world around them.¹⁸ Each clearly attaches relational influence of the Bible and its texts to their own lives in dramatically different ways. The professor may use it as a historical text, merely reflecting its truth so far as it pertained to the authors at the time the Bible was written. On the contrary, biblical literalists utilize the Bible as a proof text which constructs their own religious and moral truths in the present day. Second, biblical authority implies legitimacy and justification. As a form of legitimacy and justification, biblical authority provides biblical texts as direct evidence “to make beliefs, activities, and positions credible.”¹⁹ This is one of the main ways biblical literalists utilize the Bible to make judgments on the legitimacy and morality of same-sex marriage, primarily through citation of specific biblical verses. They use these verses as direct evidence for credible beliefs and positions which oppose same-sex marriage. Lastly, biblical literalists make claims about certain communities and individuals because of the legitimacy attached to biblical texts.²⁰ For example, biblical literalists view their arguments against same-sex marriage as entirely justified and grounded in truth because of perceived strict interpretive readings of the Bible as the direct word or the divine inspiration of God.

As I discussed previously, biblical literalists are defined by the authority they attach to the verses of the Bible and hence their strict interpretive readings, or literal readings. However, I want to problematize this attachment to biblical literalism and my previous conclusion that

¹⁸ Ibid, 48.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 49.

biblical authority is the main cause for aversion to same-sex marriage within the United States. When we look at less prominent social and political issues in the United States, such as adultery, we do not witness the same culture war taking place despite its overwhelming condemnation in scripture. For example, adultery is cited over fifty times in the Bible, including verses in the Old and New Testaments. For clarification, I am speaking specifically of adultery within the context of infidelity, not its alternative biblical understanding of idolatry, defined as the betrayal of the Christian God through worship of other deities. On the contrary, homosexuality, or more specifically, intercourse between two men is cited only a handful of times and the perceived condemnation of same-sex relations is relatively unclear. In the next sections, I provide examples of commonly cited verses that are utilized in biblical arguments against same-sex marriage. This comparison identifies and highlights the textual clarity in verses which condemn adultery relative to the more abstract verses which are interpreted as condemnations of homosexuality.

Biblical interpretations and homosexuality

Leviticus 18:22, The Story of Sodom, and Romans 1:24-28 are some of the most commonly cited biblical verses in scholarship and everyday discourse used as evidence in biblical arguments against same-sex marriage. A majority of biblical literalists' "positions on homosexuality begin... and end with" their interpretations of these biblical verses.²¹ Most "tend to presume" that these texts "speak with a single, consistent voice" that not only reflects stances of homosexuality taken in history, but also provides stances that should "equate to present-day understandings of homosexuality."²² However, upon an analysis of these verses, it becomes clear

²¹ John Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age*, (University of Michigan Press, 2013): 269.

²² *Ibid.*

that they are actually quite ambiguous. The Bible does not include instances of homosexuality understood as “the psychological disposition that inclines people to be emotionally and erotically attracted to people of their own sex.”²³ This definition and understanding of same-sex relations did not exist at the time the Bible was written and compiled. Rather, homosexuality in the context of present day biblical interpretation is commonly misunderstood to be the same as homoeroticism and “homogenitality.”²⁴ Homoeroticism and homogenitality are not psychological inclinations but are understood as “erotic encounters between people of the same sex without reference to individual orientation.”²⁵ Therefore, without consideration of the historical context in which these verses were written, the interpretation of these verses as strict condemnations of homosexuality as we define it presently is both misleading and generally unfounded.

For example, Leviticus 18:22 serves as primary example of what is commonly interpreted by evangelical scholars and biblical literalists to be a condemnation of homosexuality in the Bible. However, upon closer readings, God’s outright condemnation of homosexuality becomes less clear. Verse 18:22 specifically states, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”²⁶ Although it appears that this verse is a straightforward condemnation, this is not the case. It should first be mentioned that same-sex relations between two females is not addressed; “only men having sex with other men is at issue.”²⁷ This suggests that perhaps Leviticus 18:22 is not an issue of homosexuality at all, as it is not inclusive of all same-sex

²³ Kenneth A. Locke, “The Bible on Homosexuality: Exploring Its Meaning and Authority,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 48 no 2, (2005): 128.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol Ann Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, (Oxford University Press, 2010): 170.

²⁷ Kenneth A. Locke, “The Bible on Homosexuality: Exploring Its Meaning and Authority,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 48 no. 2, (2005): 132.

actions. Second, the word “abomination” in English, is substituted for the Hebrew word *toevath*, which is understood in the context of “ritual and religious purity.”²⁸ Therefore, Leviticus 18:22 could simply be warning against issues such as “uncleanliness, impurity, or religious/ritual taboo,” not homosexual relations.²⁹ Purity “played a central role in ancient Jewish life” because it “enabled Israel to differentiate itself from other nations.”³⁰ Male-on-male sexual relations were seen as a threat to Israel’s purity because it was believed such sexual acts were practiced by the Canaanites and hence were deemed abominations among the Israelites.³¹ Therefore, with a closer reading and added historical context, it becomes less clear that Leviticus 18:22 is an obvious condemnation of homoeroticism or homosexuality in the Bible as it is understood in the present day. Rather, it may simply be a condemnation of sporadic erotic encounters between males that were understood as taboo or impure among Israelites as opposed to a direct condemnation of homosexuality itself.

Additionally, the tale of Sodom in Genesis 18 and 19 is often used in scholarship and biblical literalist discourse as evidence of God’s condemnation of homosexuality. The tale of Sodom and Gomorrah opens in Genesis 18, with the Lord proclaiming, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”³² A scene is described where two angels sent by the Lord are being hosted by a man by the name of Lot, washing themselves and eating with him. When they are about to go to bed, “the men of Sodom...all the people to the last man, surround the house” and call out to Lot, “Where are the

²⁸ Ibid, 132-133.

²⁹ Ibid, 133.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol Ann Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, (Oxford University Press, 2010): 170.

men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.”³³ Lot pleads with them, begging, “do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.”³⁴ The men are not satisfied with this response, however, crying out, “this fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge...now we will deal worse with you than with them.”³⁵ The two angels pull Lot back inside of his house, “shut the door,” and strike all the men “with blindness” so they could not come into the house.³⁶ After this event, it is described that “the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord of out heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground” punishing Sodom for its sins.³⁷

The story of Sodom is often interpreted as “an example of God’s unequivocal condemnation of same-sex erotic encounters.”³⁸ However, closer readings of the tale reveal that the “crime of Sodom had little to do with the idea of homoerotic sex between two consenting adults.”³⁹ There has been debate over the Hebrew verb “to know” and whether it refers to sexual intercourse or to simply coming to know an individual. There are relatively few examples in the Bible which the verb “to know” references sexual intercourse, only happening in “about a dozen of its almost one thousand occurrences.”⁴⁰ However, within the story of Sodom, it is often argued that the verb “to know” is suggesting some form of sexual relations, as when the men first ask to

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 36-37.

³⁸ Kenneth A. Locke, “The Bible on Homosexuality: Exploring Its Meaning and Authority,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 48 no. 2, (2005): 128.

³⁹ Ibid, 129.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

know the two angels, Lot offers up his daughters, who have never “known a man,” or who are virgins. The offering of his virgin daughters suggests that the usage prior was referencing sexual relations as well, however, it also suggests the men of Sodom “were intent on performing male-male gang rape,” not consensual homosexual relations.⁴¹ In addition, it is not clear whether the crime of homoerotic relations is the sole cause for God’s punishment of Sodom. “One of the cardinal rules of Lot’s society was to offer hospitality to travelers” and one is obligated to shelter strangers passing through.⁴² The men of Sodom, by threatening the strangers, are breaking this cardinal rule and Lot, in attempts to uphold it, offer the strangers his daughters.⁴³ Furthermore, it is important to note that the “early commentaries on the Sodom story” do not reference sins of homoeroticism or homosexuality, rather they emphasize the “Sodomites’ breaking of the law of hospitality,” accusing them of “pride, xenophobia, and judicial offenses.”⁴⁴ Ezekiel is one main biblical figure who condemns the Sodomites for such characteristics and later, Isaiah admonishes “Sodom to ‘learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.’”⁴⁵ These discussions later in the Bible suggest that the issues with the Sodomites are not at all in relation to “sexual immorality” but rather due mostly to a lack of hospitality.⁴⁶

Lastly, Romans 1:24-26 provides what most view as an explicit example of the Bible’s stance on homoeroticism with little interpretive wiggle room. These verses state:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 130.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol Ann Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, (Oxford University Press, 2010): 1978.

degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received their own persons the due penalty for their error.⁴⁷

Similar to Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:24-26 appears to be a clear condemnation of homoeroticism. Although few argue that this verse could be interpreted differently, there are certain issues which remain unclear. For example, these verses are direct responses to a “larger polemic against idolatry.”⁴⁸ They are not in direct reference to homoeroticism. Homoeroticism, in this case, is an impurity and a degradation of passions.⁴⁹ It is a response to the initial offense, which was idolatry. Several scholars argue that Paul, when choosing homoeroticism as punishment for idolatry, was not referencing it as a sin but rather was looking at the “Gentile world and saw homoerotic activity and idolatry” and “linked the two firmly together.”⁵⁰ Additionally, it should be noted that Paul did not “apply the vocabulary of sin to homoerotic activity” but does in reference to idolatry throughout the rest of Romans and at the end “as a heading for a whole list of wrongs” which does not include or make mention of sexual behavior.⁵¹ Therefore, homoeroticism in Romans 1:24-26, in alignment with Leviticus 18:22, is understood as an impurity, not as a sin. It becomes clear upon an analysis and closer reading of all three of these verses, that an argument against same-sex marriage based upon biblical literalism and interpretation is far more complicated and blurred than is typically presented.

⁴⁷ Kenneth A. Locke, “The Bible on Homosexuality: Exploring Its Meaning and Authority,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 48 no. 2, (2005): 138.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 139.

To further problematize the impact of biblical authority and literalism in these debates, I raise the question of why some biblical issues are more salient than others in the present social and political climates. If biblical literalism serves as the sole reason for aversion towards same-sex marriage, it should also serve as the sole reason for aversion towards many other social, political, and religious issues among the U.S. populace. However, when looking at the contemporary political and social climates, some issues which are condemned in the Bible just as often, or even more frequently, as acts of homoeroticism have not risen to the public consciousness as major social, political, or religious issues in the present day. For example, adultery is not commonly recognized as a social issue which is deserving of broader political and religious intervention in the United States. As I discussed previously, however, there are over fifty clear references to adultery in the Bible. For example, Exodus: 20, or the Ten Commandments, specifically states, “You shall not commit adultery.”⁵² Similarly, in Leviticus 20:10 it is stated, “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and adulteress shall be put to death.”⁵³ Unlike the passage referencing homoeroticism in Leviticus, it is clear that this verse speaks directly to the understanding of adultery as infidelity with little to no interpretive wiggle room. It also important to note that the punishment is death, an equal punishment to the condemnation of homoeroticism in Leviticus. If the Bible is being interpreted literally, based upon the two verses in Leviticus, adultery and homoeroticism should be held in the same social and political regard.⁵⁴ Despite this, we do not see American citizens marching in the streets condemning others for cheating on their husbands and wives, but we do

⁵² Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol Ann Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, (Oxford University Press, 2010): 170. University Press, 2010. 1978.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 172.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1180.

see them protesting court rulings on same-sex marriage. Such actions combined with the 24% of Americans who do not identify as biblical literalists yet who disapprove of same-sex marriage, suggests that there is something much larger than biblical literalism driving the aversion towards same-sex marriage in the United States.

If not the Bible, what?

Historically speaking, “sex, gender, and the family are realms that have been at the crux of defining American concepts of fear and danger,” and therefore, have been at the center of some of America’s most persisting culture wars.⁵⁵ As Smith discusses in her book, *Religious Rhetoric*, these issues are perceived as elevated threats to “social power structures,” that have been intact since the birth of a Christian America.⁵⁶ Their moral elevation is a result of such issues’ tendency to “directly impact a culture’s dominant power structures,” ultimately, changing the nation’s historically entrenched status quo.⁵⁷ Homosexuality and same-sex marriage challenge both societal and religious norms of male authority and heterosexual marriage and human conception. Because of its perceived threat to these structures and institutions, LGBTQ+ individuals and allies have been countered by Christian Right groups that often categorize their activism as a “campaign to destabilize the nuclear family, weaken male authority, and de-Christianize the nation.”⁵⁸ The power struggle between these groups has resulted in an American populace which, until recently, has largely been disapproving of homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage.

⁵⁵ Leslie Dorrough Smith, *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America*, (OUP Us, 2014): 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics*, (Hachette UK, 2017): 288.

The constant struggle to maintain the status quo by Christian Americans can be witnessed throughout American history. Rather than fading with the passage of time, these concerns took on new life during the twentieth century. During the World War II era, for example, homosexuals were blamed for the “fragile condition of the country,” oftentimes being labeled as “physically and morally weak” and unfit for battle in comparison to their straight male counterparts.⁵⁹ These narratives were further exacerbated when tensions rose with the Soviet Union after the war, American conservatives often likening homosexuals and homosexual behavior to the threats of nuclear war and Communism.⁶⁰ Later, in 1977, the founder of Concerned Women for America, Beverly LaHaye, “through an apocalyptic reading of the Bible...argued that the antichrist would likely be a gay man” and demanded “political action against homosexuals,” portraying them as the literal “incarnation of evil.”⁶¹ With the rise of the AIDS pandemic in the 80s and 90s, “Christian leaders openly connected AIDS as a punishment from God for homosexual behavior.”⁶² Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, went as far as claiming AIDS was “the wrath of God upon homosexuals.”⁶³ Additionally, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Falwell was famously quoted, “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle...all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say: ‘You helped this happen.’”⁶⁴ Lastly, building up to the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in 2015, which “legalized same-sex marriage across the land,” the Christian Right

⁵⁹ Leslie Dorrough Smith, *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America*, (OUP Us, 2014): 45.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 48.

⁶² *Ibid*, 53.

⁶³ *Ibid*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

fought fiercely to stoke “fear about the future of America in a bid to stem the tide” when faced with constant victories from the “LGBT rights movement.”⁶⁵ As one can see, the Christian Right has made numerous attempts in the past and present to antagonize homosexuals and LGBTQ+ activists. In doing so, they often place these individuals at the center of evil, immorality, and causes of major tragedies.

The unique nature of these groups’ discourses is what elevates the issues of sex, gender, and the family from individualized religious qualms to broader morally founded social and political culture wars. The rhetoric used by these groups, which Leslie Smith coins as *chaos rhetoric*, labels issues such as homosexuality and same-sex marriage as “uniquely immoral” within the public sphere.⁶⁶ She defines it as “a type of declension speech that attempts to persuade an audience by stressing an imminent threat to a beloved entity.”⁶⁷ It’s major characteristics of moral authority, secular appearance, emotional appeal, and timelessness – all of which will be discussed in further detail – is the primary reason that some biblical issues such as homosexuality, are more salient in the social and political climates of the U.S. than others. I argue chaos rhetoric is the unknown factor which influenced the outlying 24% of individuals in 2014 who did not identify as biblical literalists yet disapproved of same-sex marriage.

Chaos Rhetoric: Defining Features

Chaos rhetoric is a type of speech which addresses moral decline in a way that resonates with a broad swath of Americans, including the religiously unaffiliated and the religious

⁶⁵ Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics*, (Hachette UK, 2017): 276.

⁶⁶ Leslie Dorough Smith, *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America*, (OUP Us, 2014): 59.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

moderate. Within the context of Christian Right groups and religious rhetoric, chaos rhetoric elevates secular concepts such as sex from issues of “mere biology to ultimate morality” through the “authority granted to religious rhetoric.”⁶⁸ Religious rhetoric inherently contains its own moral authority which distinguishes and elevates it from moral positions of secular, political rhetoric. In the United States, it can be argued that “American morality rhetoric is so closely conflated with religion that there is little ideological room for the concept of a value system outside of the dominant Protestant model.”⁶⁹ In other words, American morality is embedded or historically rooted in religion. Therefore, secular political rhetoric often expands upon hidden religious moral claims that have since been translated and understood as traditional American secular claims of morality. Additionally, “any religious claim is automatically a power claim because it asserts that its legitimacy comes from an ultimate and unquestionable source.”⁷⁰ These claims appeal to a “transcendent authority” or God, which makes the speech “impervious to criticism,” resulting in an appearance of superior status.⁷¹ However, chaos rhetoric surpasses religious rhetoric by enhancing its moral authority in two major ways. First, it embeds itself in secular arguments without appearing overtly religious. Smith describes chaos rhetoric as “a chameleon,” able to masquerade as ““tradition, common sense, or secular morality”” when it is, in fact, rooted in the “ideals and agendas of specific religious claims.”⁷² For example, the children’s welfare argument, or arguments which cite studies exemplifying the compromised well-being of children in gay and lesbian homes in comparison to heterosexual homes, appear as scientific and common sense moral arguments. Without reading anything religious in nature,

⁶⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 71.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 16.

individuals form conclusions that same-sex marriage is detrimental to the health of the potential future children of that couple. Therefore, same-sex marriage appears not merely religiously immoral but also dangerous on a secular level. This is an extremely useful quality within an increasingly secularizing country. Additionally, chaos rhetoric enhances the moral authority of religious rhetoric through its ability to label its opposition as “immoral, evil, or simply illogical” individuals.⁷³ Oftentimes, Christian Right groups utilize this power to target a small demographic of individuals that reject or oppose their views, accusing them of not merely acting immorally but also acting irrationally. Using the same example of the children’s welfare argument, same-sex couples who decide to have children are painted as immoral, selfish, evil, etc. It appears to secular society that these couples are ignoring the “science.” They are intentionally putting a child at risk for their own personal gain. In this context, there does not have to be anything religious in nature about this argument in order for Christian Right groups to gain support for their religious ideals. Their religious foundations are largely hidden to the broader public, appearing strictly rooted in science, secular morality, or common sense.

The second defining characteristic of chaos rhetoric is its broad emotional appeal. After creating a singular and narrow view of morality or rationality when addressing certain issues, chaos rhetoric persuades its audiences through an elicitation of fear and danger. It creates these emotions through a portrayal of the world “where threat, disorder, fear, and chaos reign” above morals, law, and religion.⁷⁴ At this stage in the rhetoric, the individuals that conservative Christian groups have labeled as immoral are now not only accountable for their own immoral actions but the destruction of everything that is “good.” It is essentially an existential threat argument comparable to political existential threats of Communism or even terrorism. In the case

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 6.

of homosexuality, these arguments suggest that such groups do not believe “gay people are inferior” but that “homosexual conduct is harmful” not only to the people who engage in it but “by extension to society at large.”⁷⁵ Typically, the legalization of same-sex marriage is portrayed as the “end of America” or a signifier that the “country is going to hell.” A showcase of perceived chaos or threat allows groups who use such rhetoric to create their own “political expedient solution” that aligns them with qualities such as, “goodness, stability, and order.”⁷⁶ These qualities allow groups to portray themselves as the saviors of society and preservers of all things which are good to us as Americans. However, they do not “persuade by advertising” the superiority of their own positions but “by positing the dangers that will arise” if the status quo order is ignored.⁷⁷ Although, if the rhetoric is successful, the group’s position will inevitably become superior. Furthermore, it is important to note that the intended emotion is almost always negative. If the rhetoric does not draw negative emotions out of its reader or listener, “political action is unlikely.”⁷⁸ For a group’s long term goals, it is important not only to reach their intended audiences but eventually to align the public with their own personal positions. The greater the emotional impact, the greater the public impact, and the greater the public impact, the greater the political impact.

Chaos rhetoric’s weaving together of a “moral, cognitive, and emotional package of attitudes” is what has made it “critical to the formation of many of America’s most enduring jeremiads.”⁷⁹ Jeremiads are understood as “large-scale cultural critiques that emphasize moral

⁷⁵ Peter Sprigg, “HOW TO RESPOND TO THE LGBT MOVEMENT,” The Family Research Council, Accessed April 24, 2020: 5.

⁷⁶ Leslie Dorrough Smith, *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America*, (OUP Us, 2014). 45&59.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

failure and call for moral redemption.” These types of critiques and their “persuasive efficacy” are dependent upon their audiences adopting “a certain utopian vision of the nation.”⁸⁰ For example, we often hear the phrases “liberty and justice for all” and “pull yourself up by the bootstraps.” These phrases create images of “America...where moral behavior is not only self-evident and uniform, but is also always rewarded.”⁸¹ As mentioned above, a successful and persisting America is reliant upon notions of constant stability, goodness, and morality. In the history of homosexuality and same-sex marriage and their relationship to American jeremiads, “the heterosexual nuclear family,” “childbearing by the proper individuals,” and “centrality of religion” have been placed at the epicenter of a stable, superior, and moral America.⁸² However, just as a jeremiad can place certain actors and structures at the center of utopia, it can also invent systems of blame if the utopian image falls apart. It does so “by locating responsibility for social problems on the poor morals of certain members of the population.”⁸³ So, if superiority of the nuclear family, “inherent goodness of childbearing,” and “centrality of religion to any healthy and functioning society” deteriorates within the American population, groups who do not fit these molds, such as, homosexuals, feminists, and liberals receive the blame.⁸⁴ It is clear to see how chaos rhetoric’s use of moral and emotional appeal is similar to lighter fluid being added to an already burning flame in a majority of America’s largest culture wars. Chaos rhetoric creates a tacit pathway for religious debates to become major politically and morally contested public and legal debates within a religiously diverse and secularizing nation.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 12.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 11.

One last unique characteristic of chaos rhetoric is its ability to adapt to “particular socio-historical circumstances.”⁸⁵ Chaos rhetoric’s malleable characteristic is why Smith distinguishes it from simple fear tactics, as it allows groups and their influences to persist in multiple times and places. In other words, chaos rhetoric essentially allows a Christian Right group’s relevance to be timeless. Not only can their religiously rooted arguments be embedded within secular ones but they can also shape themselves to recent events that spark public debate as long as the rhetoric consistently re-fabricates threats to “maintain its emotional (and thus persuasive) appeal.”⁸⁶ We have seen that this type of rhetoric has served to create a narrative of national threat surrounding homosexuality dating at least back to the 1920s. In the 1920s, the arguments against homosexuality were that gay men were not fit for war, therefore, bringing down American success abroad and making it vulnerable to foreign threats. Then the AIDS epidemic hit, allowing Christian Right groups to accredit the “sinfulness” of homosexuality to the spread of the disease. After 9/11, homosexuals were similarly blamed for the downfall of America and God’s punishment of the innocent victims of the hijackings. In the 2010s, arguments began forming revolving primarily around children’s welfare in regards to the legalization of same-sex marriage nationwide. Present debates focus on whether sexual orientation is actually a choice or a predisposition as well as a debate over whether and when religious conservatives should be exempted from providing particular services to LGBTQ+ people. As one can see, none of these arguments are religious in nature but appeal to science, common sense, or current events. Each argument, however, was presented by a Christian Right group such as Focus on the Family, the Moral Majority, or Concerned Women for America. Additionally, each focuses on large influential current events of its specific historical and temporal context. None of them mention

⁸⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

the immorality of homosexuality, however, each still has the same underlying message and effect: homosexuality is in some way irrational and detrimental to the well-being of the country.

The timelessness, persuasiveness, and influence of chaos rhetoric is why it is so impactful within the demographic of Americans that do not identify as biblical literalists. Smith points out that a main reason chaos rhetoric is so critical to Christian Right groups' success is because it is "specifically crafted for public consumption and is thus intended not only to maintain the allegiance of conservative Christians but to also convince the public at large."⁸⁷ In many ways, creating arguments solely targeted towards biblical literalists would work against or do nothing for Christian Right platforms. Constantly evoking "God-talk wherever possible" attempting to persuade individuals to vote "against gay marriage on the grounds that God hates homosexuality" only reinforces the "position of an already-religious individual."⁸⁸ Their job is not to reach the small percentage of individuals who share their common beliefs. Rather, it is their job to reach the 75% of Americans that do not share their common religious beliefs or rely so heavily upon religion for perceptions of right and wrong. Their intended audience, composed primarily of the non-religious and the religious moderate, is the main reason these groups favor "much more careful rhetoric" which is "tempered by appeals to education credentials, science, reason, and populist appeals to a 'common sense' morality."⁸⁹ Such rhetoric is a "multifaceted tactic of casting the net widely" allowing these groups to "benefit from the moral authority that religion holds while avoiding overtly religious speech."⁹⁰ To provide an example, through these tactics, "a person does not have to believe that God hates abortion rights" to form the belief that

⁸⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 70.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

abortion is immoral.⁹¹ They just have to “empathize with images of aborted fetuses or tales of women injured by the procedure” to suddenly feel “compelled to vote against abortion.”⁹² The target of this rhetoric may not even know why they feel so morally inclined to vote against abortion rights. To them, voting against abortion “just seems like ‘the right thing to do.’”⁹³

Ultimately, this perception “of a collective cultural reservoir called ‘morality’ or ‘common sense’ is closely linked with the phenomenon of rhetorical resonance.”⁹⁴ Rhetorical resonance is the “phenomenon wherein large groups of people with otherwise disparate agendas can be drawn together and their political power synthesized through emotional appeals” that each group finds “similarly attractive.”⁹⁵ The result is a moment where the emotional becomes the political, transforming Christian Right groups’ visions “of moral fortitude” to “America’s vision, rather than just the perspective of just a ‘religious’ few.”⁹⁶ Chaos rhetoric’s rhetorical resonance is a primary reason for why it is so powerful. By appearing secular, or providing images that resonate with secular audiences, chaos rhetoric is able to create a singular emotional perception of particular issues, e.g. the abortion example in which an aborted fetus elicits sadness. When such a strong emotion is elicited, the political or religious source of these issues is no longer relevant. Rather, the emotion that is felt when viewing an aborted fetus suggests abortion is *universally* wrong regardless of religious or political association. Therefore, individuals construct similar political views on that specific issue based upon the universal emotion which was elicited despite their otherwise disparate agendas.

⁹¹ Ibid, 71.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 58.

Smith's Chaos Rhetoric in the Present

The Family Research Council

One popular and more influential Christian Right group in the present day is the Family Research Council (FRC). Established in the 1980s and merging with the more well-known Focus on the Family in 1988, the Family Research Council strives to “counter the credentialed voices arrayed against life and family with equally capable men and women of faith.”⁹⁷ Its founder and first president, Gerald P. Regier, drew upon his federal experience in the Department of Health and Human Services under the Reagan administration to “link pro-family experts with government research and policy-making offices.”⁹⁸ The goal was to present policy makers, government officials, and the general public with scholarly, research driven reports which argued for the preservation of “the heritage of religious belief and family values” that had been handed down from one American generation to the next.⁹⁹ Since its inception, all four of FRC’s presidents have either served as civil servants in the federal government or have practiced law. They have grown FRC from a smaller grassroots organization to a permanent, independent nonprofit that is now located and established in Washington, D.C. In the 21st century, they have “sharpened their public policy agenda,” focusing primarily on issues such as the “sanctity of human life, defense of man-woman marriage, humane elder care, religious liberty, parental choice in education, and family tax relief.”¹⁰⁰ They have been central players in the demonizing of same-sex marriage within the United States and serves as a perfect case study of Smith’s chaos rhetoric.

⁹⁷ “Family Research Council,” Accessed April 25, 2020b.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

What immediately jumps out in the history of the Family Research Council and its structure is that it is research driven. Although the FRC does utilize purely religious rhetoric or “God-talk” in several of its pieces, a large portion of their works reflects the chameleon-like characteristic of Smith’s chaos rhetoric. A majority of the Family Research Council’s reports on same-sex marriage and homosexuality disguise their religious roots in science and scholarly studies. For example, Peter Sprigg, a Senior Fellow for Policy Studies at FRC, has written a majority of pieces which cite scholarly studies as “evidence” against the legalization of same-sex marriage. In his work, “Evidence Shows Sexual Orientation Can Change: Debunking the Myth of ‘Immutability,’” Sprigg counters the scientific and sociological narrative that “sexual orientation is ‘immutable,’” or unable to be altered. He cites organizations such as The American Psychological Association and well-renowned colleges, such as, the University of Chicago to build his case. The main piece of evidence he utilizes and describes as “one of the first comprehensive modern surveys of sexuality in the United States,” the National Health and Social Life Survey conducted by the University of Chicago demonstrates the “fluidity” of sexual orientation and same-sex attraction.¹⁰¹ He cites quantitative data which portrays the different types of attractions and sexual interactions (male-male, male-female, female-female) that individuals have acted on in contrast to their sexual orientation identification. The numbers suggest that individuals who identify as heterosexual have had both same-sex interactions and attractions, however, it also shows that those who identify solely as homosexual have also acted on heterosexual attractions.¹⁰² Sprigg uses these numbers to conclude that “change” in sexual orientation is possible. He argues that if an individual experiences a “significant level of change

¹⁰¹ Peter Sprigg, “Evidence Shows Sexual Orientation Can Change,” The Family Research Council. n.d. Accessed April 19, 2020: 4.

¹⁰² Ibid, 5.

in” attractions, behavior, or identity then “they have experienced some meaningful ‘change’ in sexual orientation which he believes the National Health and Social Life Survey exemplifies.”¹⁰³ Overall, the debunking of the “immutability” of homosexuality counters the argument that same-sex marriage is a 14th Amendment issue. If homosexuals are not born homosexuals, and there is no scientific proof that they are but there is quantitative data suggesting they are not, then marriage equality for same-sex couples should not be considered on the same grounds as heterosexual couples, or, more significantly where law is concerned, interracial couples. Therefore, there is no reason to disrupt the tradition of institutionalized heterosexual marriage in the U.S. by legalizing same-sex marriage on a scientifically ungrounded claim. As one can see, Sprigg does not have to mention religion anywhere in this piece to convince his readers to rethink the legal argument for same-sex marriage. Rather, all he has to do is cite a study which appears credible to make individuals question the foundations of their own political views.

Sprigg authored another article, the “Homosexual Parent Study” which combines chaos rhetoric’s moral, authoritative element with its use of secular argumentation. In this piece, Sprigg cites an article written by researcher Mark Regnerus and published in the journal of *Social Science Research* which presents troubling data on the welfare of children raised in homosexual homes. The study compared and contrasted the overall well-being of children in homosexual homes to children in heterosexual homes referencing things, such as, likelihood to suffer from depression and drug abuse, to being arrested, to experiencing sexual assault, etc. Sprigg summarizes Regnerus’s findings, presenting some troubling statistics. For example, Regnerus found that children of lesbian mothers in comparison to children in heterosexual homes are “an astonishing 11 times more likely to have been ‘touched sexually by a parent or other adult

¹⁰³ Ibid, 6.

caregiver' in childhood, are almost 4 times more likely to be currently on public assistance, and are more than 3 times more likely to be unemployed."¹⁰⁴ Similarly, children in both lesbian and gay homes in comparison to heterosexual homes are more likely to have been arrested more often, suffer from depression, had more sexual partners, and have lower educational attainment.¹⁰⁵ Sprigg uses all of these statistics to make a 5 point conclusion:

1) The 'intact biological family' remains the normative setting for child-rearing in American today; 2) Children do better when raised by their own, married mother and father, 3) Children suffer when raised by homosexual parents... in comparison to all other family structures, 4) Homosexual relationships are intrinsically 'unstable,' and 5) Public policy should continue to encourage the raising of children by a married mother and father.¹⁰⁶

Once again, Sprigg does not have to mention religion at all in order to persuade his readers to reconsider their opinions and political views of same-sex marriage. He takes advantage of what appears to be a credible scholarly source to present an emotional argument which addresses the well-being of innocent children. Similar to the abortion case I cited in previous discussions, his readers do not have to agree that God hates homosexuals to empathize with Sprigg's religious aversion to same-sex marriage. Rather, they see statistics which suggest that a child raised by a same-sex couple will be severely damaged emotionally and in some cases physically. Therefore, they begin to form emotionally-driven and data-driven opinions and political views of same-sex marriage and homosexual child-bearing as immoral.

Lastly, Sprigg's authors another article, "How to Respond to the LGBT Movement," which meets the final criteria of chaos rhetoric, its ability to construct visions of worldly chaos

¹⁰⁴ Peter Sprigg, "Homosexual Parent Study," The Family Research Council, n.d. Accessed April 19, 2020: 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 1-2.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 4.

and threats to society. In this work, Sprigg opens by stating, “in recent decades, there has been an assault on the sexes.”¹⁰⁷ He frames the emergence of feminism, the homosexual movement, and the transgender movement as “attacks” on undisputed realities (which can be understood as dominant social institutions of sex and gender) like “roles played by men and women in society” and inherent “differences between the sexes.” Citing his work on the immutability of sexual orientation, he works his way through major contention points that the Family Research Council attempts to disprove, including scientific evidence to support his overall argument. However, when clarifying the Family Research Council’s beliefs and opinions of homosexuals, Sprigg makes an important distinction which creates a view that homosexuality is bad for the nation. He states, “Social conservatives do *not* believe or argue that gay people are inferior, as homosexual activists charge. What we believe and argue is that *homosexual conduct* is harmful.”¹⁰⁸ Elaborating on this clarification, he refutes two major claims by LGBTQ advocates to exemplify the harm homosexual conduct presents to society. The first presents the dangers of same-sex sex interactions. Sprigg cites several studies on HIV and AIDS, STDs, and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome to support his argument that homosexual conduct is medically harmful to the nation. To take one example, he quotes a CDC warning regarding Sexually Transmitted diseases which states that:

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) have been rising among gay and bisexual men, with increases in syphilis being seen across the country. In 2014, gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men accounted for 83% of primary and secondary syphilis cases where sex of sex partner was known in the United States. Gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men often get other STDs, including chlamydia and gonorrhea infections. HPV (Human papillomavirus), the most common STD in the United States, is also

¹⁰⁷Peter Sprigg, “HOW TO RESPOND TO THE LGBT MOVEMENT,” The Family Research Council, Accessed April 24, 2020: 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 4.

a concern for gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men. Some types of HPV can cause genital and anal warts and some can lead to the development of anal and oral cancers. Gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men are 17 times more likely to get anal cancer than heterosexual men.¹⁰⁹

Similarly, Sprigg refutes the claim that “societal discrimination and stigma” are the sole reasons for higher “rates of mental health problems” among homosexuals. He cites several studies such as the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association who provide statistics admitting to higher levels of drug and alcohol abuse among gay men and lesbian women in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. One statistic Sprigg highlights from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), reported that:

lesbian and bisexual women who were ‘out’ experienced more emotional stress as teenagers and were 2 to 2.5 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation in the past 12 months than heterosexual women. Meanwhile, lesbian and bisexual women who were not ‘out’ were more likely to have attempted suicide than heterosexual women.¹¹⁰

In alignment with all of Sprigg’s other articles, he can create a perception of threat to societal health without discussing anything religious in nature. His readers are still left with differing opinions on the dangers posed by same-sex interactions and overall well-being of American citizens regardless of their religious affiliations.

An analysis of articles written and published by the Family Research Council shows how Christian Right groups utilize Smith’s chaos rhetoric to persuade a larger, less Christian and less religiously devout public. They shape the public’s visions of a prospering and stable America

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 8.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 10.

around the persistence of dominant, status quo institutions of sex, such as, heterosexual marriage, traditional gender roles, and childbearing by the proper individuals. A majority of their articles do not rely on religious rhetoric or cite biblical verses as would be expected. It appears that they deliberately avoid using religious language and biblical evidence to refute American contestations of same-sex marriage and homosexuality. In place of such arguments, the Family Research Council and its fellows relies on journal articles and well-known and respected associations to compile meaningful “scientific” evidence. This evidence then presents perceived notions of threat or danger to particular demographics or to the overall well-being of society, instilling negative emotions in its readers, and thereby accomplishing social and political persuasion. Without appearing credible under the umbrella of scientific evidence and eliciting negative emotions, Family Research Council’s work most likely would be rendered ineffective in reaching its less religious audience.

Although it is important to note that many of these articles fail to acknowledge other sociological factors that may contribute to many of the statistics cited, I argue that this will most likely go unnoticed among a majority of its readers. Being a form of rhetoric, these arguments have the ability to create their own particular reality. Residing in the discursive structures of “knowledge, power, and agency,” chaos rhetoric allows for a certain “physical control over the population” and “ideological control over the terms” of its own existence.¹¹¹ This is how it engages with mythmaking, “or techniques...to naturalize a relationship between things that otherwise have no inherent connection.”¹¹² For example, it can be seen that the Family Research Council enmeshes certain concepts, like child-welfare and homosexuality, infusing “the

¹¹¹ Leslie Dorrough Smith, *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America*, (OUP Us, 2014): 60.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

relationship between the two with a robust dose of judgment-altering negative emotion.”¹¹³ As a result, the negative emotion felt “pushes the reader to be more likely to adopt the terms of this relationship automatically,” giving little to no potential thought on their actual incompatibility.¹¹⁴ Therefore, I have reason to doubt that readers, unless previously educated on sociological issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, would likely acknowledge the lack of reference to other potential causes for a child’s deteriorated well-being in same-sex households.

Conclusion

After a closer analysis of the impact of biblical literalism and authority on a largely religiously moderate United States population, it is clear that biblical literalism and authority are not the driving forces for aversion to same-sex marriage in the United States. Not only are the verses which biblical literalists often cite as condemnations of homosexuality fairly unclear but they are also relatively unfounded when unpacking their historical context in relation to present day understandings of homosexuality. A closer reading of several of these verses suggests that they could have several different interpretations based upon different translations. Therefore, they cannot be interpreted as concrete condemnations of homosexuality as opposed lesser issues of certain cultural taboos. Lastly, by comparing issues of adultery in the Bible to issues of homosexuality, one can conclude that certain biblical issues are less salient in U.S. public realms with little regard to the frequency and clarity of the verses in which they are condemned. This suggests that biblical literalists do not always attach the same authority to certain claims in the Bible as they do others, affording them the ability to elevate certain religious issues to broader moral and political ones.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 61.

Therefore, I conclude that the general aversion towards homosexuality in 2014 among the United States population was not wholly a result of biblical literalism and biblical authority but was the result of popular conservative Christian groups' heavy use of chaos rhetoric. As discussed, the unique characteristics of chaos rhetoric such as its emotional and persuasive appeal, secular appearance, and malleability to particular socio-historical contexts makes it particularly influential among a religious moderate to non-religious American majority. However, I argue its secular appearance is what makes it most impactful in swaying a largely secular American populace. By embedding inherently religious rhetoric within secular arguments, conservative Christian groups appeal emotionally to a less religious, or a more religiously diverse, audience. In the present day, it can be argued that this is necessary for the survival of religious moral positions in broader secular U.S. political and social climates. In keeping with Smith's conception of myth-making, chaos rhetoric allows conservative Christian groups to connect two concepts which are inherently different or unrelated and make them appear as if science, commonsense, or secular morality links them together in a negative, nearly causal relationship. Therefore, more secular individuals are presented with arguments or images which resonate with them but, in reality, may have little to no scientific founding. However, a lack of supporting science is not necessary as long as the argument *appears* to be grounded in science or more secular forms of argumentation. If it appears secular, it will more likely be accepted and taken as a truth claim with not much further inquiry among a general American public. This chameleon-like characteristic of chaos rhetoric is what allows it to maintain its emotional appeal and timelessness. If it could not hide itself in secular concepts, chaos rhetoric would have relatively little emotional impact on a religiously declining American populace. In fact, if it appeared overtly religious, it may lead to the direct political downfall of conservative

Christian groups as opposed to their political survival. Therefore, I argue that chaos rhetoric's emotional appeal and adaptability to different socio-historical climates are bi-products of its largely secular appearance which allows for a religious position to be made relevant in an increasingly secular America. Once it is made relevant, or deemed a credible position, elicitation of negative emotions helps to elevate the status of the claim from a relevant political position to an existential moral threat which demands national attention.

However, in the present day, conservative Christian groups are faced with an American majority that now largely supports same-sex marriage.¹¹⁵ I hypothesize this is a result of the Obama administration's political rhetoric which largely supported the legalization and normalization of same-sex marriage, essentially toppling the influence of conservative Christian groups' use of chaos rhetoric. During Obama's two terms, approval for same-sex marriage rose from 39% in 2008 to 55% in 2016.¹¹⁶ Despite the efforts of conservative Christian groups to limit Obama's influence over not only the religiously moderate but also younger evangelicals, this is the largest jump in approval of same-sex marriage over eight years in American history.¹¹⁷ However, since Trump took office in 2016, the approval rate, which reached 62% in 2017, has dropped back down to 61% in 2019.¹¹⁸ Although this is only a 1% decrease, it is the first decline in approval of same-sex marriage seen in 11 years, suggesting some significance. With Trump selecting Mike Pence as a Vice President, who is largely recognized for his harsh stances against same-sex marriage and advocacy for the use of conversion therapy, I hypothesize this

¹¹⁵ "Changing Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), Accessed May 6, 2020.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Laurie Goodstein, "Obama Made Gains Among Younger Evangelical Voters, Data Shows," *New York Times* 6 (2008).

¹¹⁸ "Changing Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), Accessed May 6, 2020.

administration's largely indifferent or negative rhetoric of same-sex marriage has influenced the overall decrease in approval among the U.S. population. These observations may imply interesting relationships between chaos rhetoric employed by conservative Christian groups and political rhetoric used by political elites. Additionally, they may signify unique alternating roles of chaos rhetoric in political environments which are conducive to religious rhetoric as opposed to those which are discouraging of it. For example, perhaps chaos rhetoric serves as merely a survival mechanism for conservative Christian right groups in largely secular and liberalizing political administrations. On the other hand, in conservative and more expressively religious political administrations, perhaps it serves more so as a tool of influence and solidification of certain religiously based political claims.

If I were to extend this study, I would like to focus further research on comparing the influences of chaos rhetoric both within and outside of political rhetoric in American culture wars. If observed more closely, Smith's chaos rhetoric, despite its tacit religious nature and hence secular emotional appeal, may be found less influential than political rhetoric within a largely secularized U.S. population on issues such as same-sex marriage. This might suggest that chaos rhetoric utilized by conservative Christian groups is not taken as authoritatively as claims made by political elites as may be seen in the case of the approval of same-sex marriage throughout the Obama administration. If this is the case, chaos rhetoric may not always be a tool of mass political and emotional influence as Smith suggests but rather a tool for conservative Christian groups to cling to their political and moral relevance in a political climate which is increasingly discouraging of religious rhetoric.

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