

The meaning of “family values”

As we approach the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, gays and lesbians face a wide range of human rights challenges, including the right to work, the right to serve in the military, the right to healthcare and freedom from violence and stigma. From a long list of controversial topics, one might assume that gay marriage should be the *least* divisive of these. After all, gay marriage is a relatively private venture, compared to the more public arenas of the workforce, healthcare system and hate-crimes legislation. As a personal enterprise, it has by far the smallest direct impact on the straight population. Yet strangely, the single issue of whether or not we will allow gay people to marry has risen above all other concerns to become easily the most notorious, the most hotly-contested of all the gay-rights topics. Why is this so?

The debate raging over gay marriage represents a line in the sand which many conservatives believe we must not cross. Some who are willing to concede every other freedom to gays and lesbians cannot bring themselves to compromise on this one point. But why? What is it about gay marriage in particular that so greatly aggravates so many? To answer this question, it may be best to take conservatives at their word: Marriage, more than any other gay-rights issue seems to disturb the conservative spirit, a spirit that chiefly goes by the name of “family values.”

Family values versus gay marriage

Our national dispute between family values and gay marriage has arrived at a place where it’s hard for *either* side to stay calm or objective. On the side of family values are conservative Christians who believe they’re answering the call of God and protecting what remains of human decency. On the side of gay marriage is a group that believes it is caught up in a dire struggle for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For some, the stakes are nothing less monumental than the bible and tradition. For others, the rights of an entire people to marriage, inheritance, and child-raising all hang in the balance.

I’ve long been perplexed by the phrase, “family values.” How was it that this particular motto became the conservative rallying cry? And how was it that the existence of gays (and generally gay *families*) could be so threatening to the conservative order, an order most often described by those same two seemingly harmless words?

If, by “family values,” we intended “value in family,” then I would think it a common, if obvious ambition. But family values is actually a complex set of beliefs plucked from the pages of the bible and common practice, and made especially puzzling, since there’s little agreement on which pages we should be using.

In general, the argument against same-sex couples claims they’re incompatible with family values because they aren’t defined as *being* a family. Before we’ve even begun, family values are asserted only for *certain* kinds of families. If homosexuality disallows this kind, gays can only put things right by quitting their charade. They must disband their families *altogether*, and re-make them in the shape of the conservative model, firmly prescribed as one straight female mother, one straight male father, and

straight children. In other words, if gays want to participate in family, they must first become straight. Any variation from this family model threatens the principle of family values and, by inference, the fabric of our nation, if not civilization itself.

When we try to understand the roots of the argument – the “why” behind the social mandate – the closest we usually get is a vague argument about the family being the fundamental building block from which our nation was made. We’re then warned that messing with the fundamental unit threatens the stability of the entire building. Think of America as a pyramid and its families are the stone blocks. Enter the gays, who want to use blocks made out of wood or plastic (or worse, feather boas) and, well, you get the idea. But families aren’t really blocks, after all, and no one has ever adequately explained why our larger community of families cannot *also include gay families*.¹

Then one day I came across an essay by black feminist Hortense Spillers that caused a domino-like chain reaction of realizations in me. After a long struggle with the mystery of family values, the bundled meanings began to unravel. My first insight was that the modern dispute over gay marriage isn’t the first time in history *some people* have contrived to fiddle with *other peoples’* families.

A brief history of power: family values and pater familias

When American and British entrepreneurs were in the business of importing slaves to Southern plantations, many were afraid these dark-skinned foreigners might get out of control, so strict measures were adopted to make sure the power structure was maintained. Like modern gay families, black families weren’t defined as families at all. Negro slaves, aside from being prohibited from marrying, were not allowed to raise their own children. Father, mother and child were all sent to different plantations, assuring that existing families were first broken and then remade. The new head of the family, the “*pater familias*” was now the slave owner, and each slave took the name of the master of the plantation to which he or she had been sold. In her essay, Spillers quotes from Frederick Douglas’ poignant 1845 *Narrative*, where he writes of being separated in infancy from his mother:

*For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.*²

Why was it so important for the slave owners to separate slave families? Spillers makes the case that it was used to maintain power over them:

¹ Honestly, the issue can’t really be *procreation*, because no one has in seriousness tried to suggest more than a small percentage of families would ever be made of same-sex couples. The (very) few conservatives who argue that gay rights would usher an end to procreation (and therefore the end of the human race) have failed to realize *they’re suggesting everyone is, in fact, gay*, and that it is only the bible, the law, and the resultant social stigma that prevents us *all* from rushing into same-sex unions.

² Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; reprint, New York, 1968), quoted in Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, Mass, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 665).

*It is this rhetorical and symbolic move [remaking the family] that declares primacy over any other human and social claim.*³

Slave owners had discovered a way to replace, with surgical precision, the black heads-of-household with white ones. In doing so, they were able to exert a level of control not possible otherwise. Rather than being mere employers, the slave owners now had *complete* control over the newly reconstructed black family units. This gave them power over all affairs, public and private, which was supreme authority, and in the spirit of the old Roman expression “pater familias,” the power of life and death.⁴ As I read Spillers’ essay, I began to understand what’s at stake when we say “family values,” and the resultant belief that our newly-forming (gay) families must be dismantled. Could it be that the reason gays can’t access the rights and privileges of family is not because “family” is a building block of society (which has little meaning), but because “head of household” is equivalent to “political power?” With that kind of clout at stake, today’s power elite cannot bear a gay head of household any more than it could in the past bear a black one.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in an essay entitled “Between Men,” examines the idiom, “A man’s home is his castle,” to understand the link between “family” and “power” that entered the vernacular with the shift from feudalism to capitalism:

*The man who has his home is a different person from the lord who has a castle; and the forms of property implied in the two possessives (his [mortgaged] home/his [inherited] castle) are not only different, but . . . mutually contradictory. The contradiction is assuaged and filled in by transferring the lord’s political and economic control over the environs of his castle to an image of the father’s personal control over the inmates of his house.*⁵

Couched in this transfer of meaning is a mandate. We understand the difference between a (mortgaged) house and an (inherited) castle – between a head of household and a head of state – yet our historical links between power and family are so magnetic – so compelling – that we, by a cultural directive, are obliged to forget⁶ the difference. The phrase, “A man’s home is his castle” is a remarkable expression

³ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 665.

⁴ The pater familias had vitae necisque potestas - the “power of life and death” - over his children, his wife (in some cases), and his slaves, all of whom were said to be sub manu, “under his hand”. If a child was deformed, under the laws of the Twelve Tables the pater familias was required to have the child put to death by exposure. He had the power to sell his children into slavery; Roman law provided, however, that if a child has been sold as a slave three times, he is no longer subject to the patria potestas. The pater familias had the power to approve or reject marriages of his sons and daughters; however, an edict of the Emperor Caesar Augustus provided that the pater familias could not withhold that permission lightly. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paterfamilias>

⁵ Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Between Men,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, Mass, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 706).

⁶ The word “forgetting,” as I have used it refers to forgetting in Marx’s sense: “This eternalization or naturalization of historical conditions and historical change [Marx] called ‘a forgetting.’ Its effect, he argued, was to reproduce, at the heart of economic theory, the categories of vulgar, bourgeois common sense. Statements about economic relations thus lost their conditional and premised character, and appeared simply to arise from ‘how things are’ and, by implication, ‘how they must forever be.’” “The Rediscovery of Ideology” By Stuart Hall, in “Literary Theory: An Anthology,” Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Blackwell Publishers, 1998, Malden, Mass, p. 1058).

because it *urges us to forget*. We comply by “filling in” the discrepancies until “head of household” and “head of state” become synonymous, and this has the unfortunate result of making us believe we cannot allow black or gay (or “other”) families to exist. To a large degree, we therefore romanticize “family” by filling in the time gap between the modern head of household and the Roman equivalent, the “pater familias,” who exerted absolute legal power over his family members and made that “father of the family” look much more like a medieval lord than his modern counterpart.

This is what family values means to us: The maintaining of a political framework that conspires to deprive outsiders access to power.⁷ It is ironic that the wistful longing to return to the “good-old days” represented by the expression “family values,” this hoarding of power supposedly contained in the office of “head of household,” is the result of an almost superstitious overemphasis on the inviolability of the old Roman concept of pater familias – a power in legal fact and in social practice already vacated long ago.⁸

Social change: Traumatizing the status quo

Our discovery has not yet taken into account the obvious sexism explicit in the statement, “A man’s home is his castle.” Even today, the rephrasing to, “A woman’s home is *her* castle,” may be met with polite but condescending titter. Nor does the expression “mater familias” resonate to our ears any more than it would have to Roman citizens. It is somewhat disturbing, therefore, when women take the side of family values, since these same values have *always been forged at the expense of women*, and have in fact stunted the flowering of women’s rights.⁹ It’s similarly worrying when other minority groups fail to remember their own mutual inheritance of segregation and disempowerment. Recent examples include large, organized groups of Mormons and blacks who cried “family values” in their support of California’s Proposition 8, which summarily outlawed gay marriage after its brief honeymoon in that state. Ironically, *each* of these groups (women, blacks, and Mormons) themselves have histories of being

⁷ Nor do we suffer delusions that participation in “family” is not a position of *some* power. Unlike the position of head of state, however, participation in family (and in the legal structures that determine it) ought to be a right available to all people.

⁸ Only a Roman citizen, someone with status civitatis, could enjoy the status of pater familias. There could only be one holder of the office within a household. Even male adult filii remained under the authority of their pater while he still lived, and could not acquire the rights of a pater familias while he was yet alive; at least in legal theory, all their property was acquired on behalf of their father, and he, not they, had ultimate authority to dispose of it. Those who lived in their own households at the time of the pater’s death succeeded to the status of pater familias over their respective households (pater familias sui iuris), even if they were only in their teens. Women were always under the control (sub manu) of a pater familias, either their original pater, or the pater of their husband’s family once married (which could be her husband or not). Over time, the absolute authority of the pater familias weakened, and rights that theoretically existed were no longer enforced or insisted upon. The power over life and death was abolished, the right of punishment was moderated, and the sale of children was restricted to cases of extreme necessity. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paterfamilias>

⁹ There are far too many examples of biblical patriarchy to list here. I will submit two passages:

1 Corinthians 14:34-35, *Let the women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be in subjection, as also saith the law. And if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home: for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church.*

1 Timothy 2:12, *I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.*

denied specific familial rights and privileges.¹⁰ Historically, these were the groups excluded from participating in family values!

What will happen if we allow gay marriage? Will society as we know it literally and catastrophically fall apart? Looking at history, I would have to say no, I think we'll be safe. Just as safe, you might say, as we were when we allowed blacks to marry and raise their own families. Society changed, certainly. It became more tolerant, though some would question how far we've actually come. Gradually, it became the norm to accept all *races* as equal, yet we still find ourselves quibbling over *other* groups we prefer to call "less than."

Martin Luther King said that, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."¹¹ Realistically, the idea of surrendering long-enjoyed power over a minority group will always rankle some conservatives. After all, part of the definition of "conservative" is "reluctant to change." Another defining feature of conservative belief is that we *ought* to be slow to give up the best of our beloved traditions. But few of those same people would still regret, as conservatives once regretted, the liberation of black slaves. Similarly, it is doubtful that the existence of gay families will bring about the end of the world. Surely we find unfounded the oft-repeated fear that new *gay* marriages will cause the decline of old *straight* ones.

Over the past several weeks, I've come across two separate articles by conservatives in states where gay marriage has now been legalized. The authors of these articles claim to have been against gay marriage until after it was legalized. Their opinions on the subject didn't change because the law demanded it, but only when they realized, contrary to conservative rhetoric, that the change in law did not cause their own marriages to fall apart. These editorials included funny segments about nervously driving home after the news came in, desperately hoping their own marriages hadn't magically dissolved the moment gay marriages were legalized. The surprise for these writers was that one group's liberty needn't concern the rest of us. Stated simply, a (gay) marriage in Massachusetts does not cause a (straight) divorce in Maine.

Religious roots and selective amnesia

"Family values," as a politically-charged catchphrase, was created in the early 1980's by conservative Republicans¹² as an answer to growing secularism in the United States. When religious (and specifically *biblical*) arguments no longer held sway over growing segments of the population, a non-religious rationale was developed to justify the politics of traditional ideals, such as abstinence-only sex education, and strong oppositions to adultery, abortion, and same-sex marriage. Rather than quoting scripture, the new secular "family values" approach relied on tradition, a pensive yearning to return to the "good old days." But the veil between family values and religion is a thin one, and we cannot speak

¹⁰ Women have historically been denied the right to serve as head of household or to own property (*pater familias* is, by definition, a *male* head of household), blacks were denied the right to marry or serve as head of household, and Mormons are still prohibited from marrying multiple partners. It is unfortunate that these and other groups typically fail to stand up for each other, though there are of course many exceptions to every rule.

¹¹ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' *Why We Can't Wait*, 1963

¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_values

on the topic for long before the issue of religion comes to the fore. Indeed, religious belief, and specifically *Christian religious belief*, is the central defining force in the formation of what we call “family values.” Accordingly, when confronted with the logic that says a free people ought to respect each other’s liberties, many conservatives turn to the bible. After all, the bible does seem to offer an exception to the golden rule, authorizing a sort of blanket permission for the Christian believer to intervene in other (but always *lesser*) peoples’ lives.

I and countless others have already written essays, articles, books and libraries on the subject of biblical “literalism,” and it is not my intention to repeat those arguments here. Nor do I expect to win debates against pious “certainty.” I will furthermore not try to claim that the scriptures take a friendly stance toward gay relationships. Instead, we will see that using the bible in politics tends to invoke a process of selective “amnesia.” Just as the bible is now used to support attacks on gay marriage, let us remember in the not-so-distant past it was also used to routinely defend slavery:¹³

*Titus 2:9-10, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-25, 1 Peter 2:18-25, 1 Timothy 6:1-2 and many other passages call on slaves to be obedient and subservient. The apostle Paul endorses slavery and sends a runaway Christian slave Philemon back to his master. American ministers and conservatives often quoted these passages to justify slavery. The Southern Baptist Convention was founded for the purpose of preserving the Christian basis for slavery. To their credit Southern Baptists apologized in 1995.*¹⁴

Paul Gilroy, in his essay entitled “The Black Atlantic,” suggests that colonial rationalities, *including bible-based politics* should have lost their privilege once they were used to justify slavery:

*Though it is seldom acknowledged even now, this [colonial, western] tradition lost its exclusive claim to rationality partly through the way that slavery became internal to western civilization and through the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror.*¹⁵

Not long ago, many Americans were insistent in quoting scripture to support Hitler’s anti-Semitism. Matthew 23:35, Matthew 27:25, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, Revelation 3:9, and many other passages¹⁶ were consistently used to make the rounding up or extermination of Jews seem like a good idea. While

¹³ Examples include:

Leviticus 25:44-45, *Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property.*

¹⁴ “Bible supports slavery,” by Patrick Garner, Feb. 23, 2004.

<http://media.www.westerncourier.com/media/storage/paper650/news/2004/02/23/Opinion/Bible.Supports.Slavery-615238.shtml>

¹⁵ Paul Gilroy, “The Black Atlantic,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, Mass, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 975).

¹⁶ Examples include:

Matthew 23:35 (also Lk 11:50-51), *And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar;*

Matthew 27:25, *All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"*;

John 8:44 (also Rev 2:9), *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire;*

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, *You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last;*

Revelation 3:9, *I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars - I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.*

few people take pro-slavery and anti-Semitic scriptures literally today, some who call themselves “biblical literalists” (but who we now understand to be *selective* literalists) still claim that scripture *commands* them to deny gays the right to participate in family. If we can accept that “biblical literalists” are in fact *selecting* passages that prop up their own vision of family values, then we can hopefully assent to *un-select* them. This should be no more difficult than *un-selecting* the scriptures that promote slavery, anti-Semitism and prohibit, for example, eating shellfish.¹⁷

Indeed, given its long history of abuse, it is surprising that the bible is still used at all in political discourse. Advocates of biblical literalism easily agree that mistakes were made in the past, yet are eager to insist that now they have arrived at a more valid reading. I tend to side with Mark Twain, who is attributed with the saying, “Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.” The point being that, as Gilroy has asserted, the Bible may have lost its privilege as the preeminent legislative resource when it was employed to justify previous wrongs.

Freedom may not be free, but it’s not a scarce resource, either. One person who is free to do what he likes doesn’t automatically “use up” the freedoms that others seek to enjoy, any more than a marriage in one state causes a divorce in another. It is possible to imagine a world full of loving, married couples gay and straight, with enough physical and ideological room for everyone to live together peacefully.

I’m willing to go along with the idea that the family is indeed the fundamental building block of society, but gays have the right of inclusion in the family role, and the right to believe they’re as valuable in that role as anyone else. If families are building blocks, then any family based on love is made of stone, not wood or plastic, as we’ve been led to believe. In a free society, *all* people have the right to coexist peacefully; therefore so do all relationships consecrated by consenting adults, and based on mutual love and respect. Now that’s what I call family values.

– Troy Carlyle

¹⁷ Examples include:

Leviticus 11:10, *But all in the seas or in the rivers that do not have fins and scales, all that move in the water or any living thing which is in the water, they are an abomination to you.*

Leviticus 11:11, *They (shellfish) shall be an abomination to you; you shall not eat their flesh, but you shall regard their carcasses as an abomination.*

Leviticus 11:12, *Whatever in the water does not have fins or scales; that shall be an abomination to you.*