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Religious Equity

A Path to Greater LGBTQ Inclusion

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Religious liberty and LGBTQ civil rights are falsely portrayed as being at opposite ends of the cultural and policy spectrum. We have seen this in cases brought before the Supreme Court involving employment rights, commerce, marriage, and adoption. Associate Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito have recently even gone so far as to frame LGBTQ rights as somehow “atextual” and “novel” while also making the claim that privileging LGBTQ rights will present “ruinous consequences for religious liberty.”¹ But the basic assumption about religious liberty here ignores the fact that people who identify as LGBTQ do not sit outside of religious life in the United States. In fact, more than other populations, the LGBTQ community, inclusive of myriad faith expressions, represents the fullest manifestation of true religious freedom. Because many LGBTQ people experience multiple layers of marginalization, LGBTQ faith identities provide a powerful test case for the importance of religious liberty as both a cultural and a policy priority. A more fully inclusive interpretation of religious freedom is required to reconcile the perceived divide between LGBTQ civil rights and religious liberty—a policy perspective

that recognizes that within LGBTQ identities there exists a wide range of equally valid and sincerely held religious views, moral philosophies, and practices of faith. What is needed is an equity lens.

The landscape of religion in the United States is shifting. Data from the Pew Research Center indicates that the trend away from organized, traditional religion toward religious non-affiliation continues to grow, with a full 26 percent of the population identifying as unaffiliated as of 2019.² According to data from Pew Research, LGBTQ populations are not immune to this trend, with a full 41 percent of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual adults identifying as atheist or agnostic compared with just 22 percent of straight adults.³

But simply because some LGBTQ people don’t identify with an organized religious home does not mean that they are a-religious in general or that LGBTQ people eschew any kind of ethical or moral identity or social accountability. In fact, people who claim non-religious identities are more vulnerable to exclusion because of how the argument for religious liberty is dominated by traditional (often Christian) religious frameworks. Non-religious voices of all

kinds, including LGBTQ, are painted as less morally legitimate and more ethically disengaged than their devout counterparts. But there are growing efforts to counteract this narrative. Organizations such as the LGBT Humanist Alliance, relaunched in 2016, are oriented towards building awareness of, and community for, LGBT-identified humanists.⁴ During the 2020 election cycle, the Biden campaign included intentional outreach to non-religious communities, including LGBTQ communities, with the creation of the Humanists for Biden platform led by author and humanist scholar Greg Epstein.⁵ This represents the first effort of a major political party to engage the non-religious community in an explicit way, signaling the growing importance of the non-religious as part of the dialogue in politics.⁶

But the same study that highlights LGB agnostic adults found that *spirituality* is no less important to LGB people than their straight counterparts.⁷ In fact:

LGB Americans are *more* likely than straight adults to say they regularly feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe. Roughly half of gay and lesbian adults (51%) and bisexuals (53%) say this, compared with 45% of straight Americans.⁸

Clearly, it is important to look at LGBTQ faith expression through a more nuanced lens. LGBTQ individuals and communities are exploring a variety of ways to hold and live questions of meaning and ethical living.

The importance of this exploration is also supported by the growing number of progressive LGBTQ religious, spiritual, and ethical leaders visible as advocates in the public square.⁹ Names such as Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, Abby Stein, The Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart, Mahdia Lynn, and The Rev. Frederick Davie appear

regularly in both faith and political commentary; they are drivers at the center of national conversations on progressive faith and meaning making.

In addition to progressive faith leaders, LGBTQ Christian evangelicals from historically conservative backgrounds are becoming increasingly visible in their communities. *Sojourners*, an evangelical Christian magazine and social justice organization founded by author and activist Jim Wallis, has evolved from its religiously conservative positions on LGBTQ life. In a post-Obergefell world, the magazine and the social justice agenda of *Sojourners* includes more commentary about LGBTQ issues and features the voices of pro-LGBTQ advocates. Another example is The Wild Goose Festival, an annual religious music festival with evangelical roots that promotes “a transformational community grounded in faith-inspired social justice.”¹⁰ This event has grown to offer enlightened pro-LGBTQ commentary while creating intentional space that welcomes LGBTQ-identified people of all religious backgrounds.

Younger evangelicals are also coming forward to express their impatience with religiously conservative church organizations to update their policies and priorities. A new organization, Beloved Arise, offers an explicitly intentional approach. The Beloved Arise mission, “[t]o celebrate and empower queer youth of faith,” reflects the vision and insight of its founder Jun Love Young.¹¹ Young’s work represents a response to a real need. According to the Trevor Project National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health “more than 1 in 3 LGBTQ youth identify with a religion, and 1 in 4 describe it as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ to them.”¹² Beloved Arise is one example of how young people within a historically conservative

church structure have taken it upon themselves to claim both their religious identity and their LGBTQ identity.

The emergence of an organization like Beloved Arise and the increasing LGBTQ visibility in evangelical as well as progressive faith settings signal important social momentum. This is the movement of LGBTQ people claiming their place in faith community. Still, politics and policy continue to pit LGBTQ identities against religion. In order to dispel the myth of LGBTQ identity as being somehow oppositional to religion, faith, and spirituality, and in order to break down the biases that currently exist in the public policy struggles for “religious freedom” for a select conservative few but not all, a new policy framework must be envisioned. What is needed is a religious equity framework that explicitly serves to hold and defend all people in the United States’ diverse spiritual interests. An equity framework can acknowledge that LGBTQ identity is neither contradictory to religious identity (including conservative evangelical belief) nor inherently non-religious. LGBTQ identities are inclusive of all of the spiritual diversities in our society.

RELIGIOUS EQUITY: A POLICY ADAPTATION

In 2011, PolicyLink outlined a plan in *America’s Tomorrow: Equity is the Superior Growth Model - Summary*. This research establishes economic equity as a “superior growth model” for a stronger, more inclusive economy.¹³ A similar approach to “religious equity” may be one innovative way to establish paths of reconciliation and expansion for the conversation about faith and policy, particularly when it relates to LGBTQ inclusion.

The *America’s Tomorrow* summary

begins with three broad goals: “Reducing Inequality is Good for Growth”; “Diversity is an Economic Asset”; and “Building a Skilled Workforce is Critical to Securing Our Economic Future.”¹⁴ A religious equity model could mirror these goals by establishing common interest and equity-based opportunity in the context of faith as it intersects with policy:

- *Reduce inequality* – Create systems where conservative mainline traditions cannot be privileged over less traditional expressions or non-faith and vice versa. Here, the goal is to create a policy container where the complexity of maintaining “freedom of religion” as well as “freedom from religion” is a priority.
- *Diversity as an asset* – Recognize that breadth of religious expression is a true reflection of the core values of American government and the spirit of the Constitution.
- *Skill as an asset* – Honor the need for specific expertise in supporting diverse needs. One size does not fit all.

The *America’s Tomorrow* growth model for economic equity then points toward three key areas for implementing the equity strategy: infrastructure, new business and jobs, and preparation for “tomorrow.”¹⁵ Adapting these to the priorities of religious liberty:

- *Infrastructure* – Establish a modern interpretation and set of precedents related to the Establishment Clause of the Constitution. Acknowledge the need for more detailed and applicable definitions for a diverse population.
- *Purpose (business)* – Explore applications for the exercise of both “freedom of” and “freedom from”

religion through the equity lens.

- *Prepare for tomorrow* – Recognize that expressions of faith will continue to grow and evolve with a diverse and globally interconnected connected human population. Build the anticipation of this growth potential into policy and practice.

This *religious equity* model as applied here begins by looking at one of the most (religiously) marginalized groups (LGBTQ populations) and ultimately creates solutions that positively impact all faith expressions, progressive and conservative alike. Just as *America's Tomorrow* states that “[equity] is the path to prosperity-for all,” religious equity could be a path to religious inclusion and affirmation for all.¹⁶

A POSSIBLE CASE STUDY IN RELIGIOUS EQUITY

LGBTQ civil rights continue to be challenged by conservative religious liberty advocates. In November 2020, the Supreme Court heard arguments in *Fulton v City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*. This case broadly questions, “[w]hether free exercise plaintiffs can only succeed by proving a particular type of discrimination claim.”¹⁷ More specifically, the case considers “whether the government violates the First Amendment by conditioning a religious agency’s ability to participate in the foster care system on taking actions and making statements that directly contradict the agency’s religious beliefs.” In friend-of-the-court briefs, such as the one filed by *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, et. al*, conservative religious liberty advocates have portrayed *Fulton* as another attack on religion.¹⁸ Progressive advocates regard this as a case

that would set a precedent for more government funded agencies to deny services based on a “religious test.”¹⁹

A religious equity lens on a case such as *Fulton* would consider the religious objections of the foster care agencies in question but place equal importance on the religious expression and motivation of same-sex couples seeking to provide foster care. Rather than creating a zero-sum solution that privileges one over the other through a religious test, the equity lens could reasonably factor out the question of religious priority by equating the positions. Through this lens, the case moves from the comparative framing of “religion vs. non-religion” and becomes a question of an agency’s capacity to comply with equal accommodation as an agent of the government.

CONCLUSION

LGBTQ civil rights have been affirmed by numerous cases, laws, and policies.²⁰ LGBTQ civil rights do not detract from the opportunities or legitimacy of any other groups’ rights. The tendency of progressive policymakers to lean away from the religious argument is only deepening the divide between secular and sectarian. A religious equity model would instead lean into LGBTQ faith identity as a full and legitimate equal in the conversation about religious liberty. By acknowledging that all parties concerned have a valid religious or faith identity, even if that identity is non-religious, there is no longer a question of one religion being able to take precedence over another. Religious equity is one tool we have to end the policies that cancel out, deny, restrict, erase, and damage LGBTQ identity based on the grounds of a flawed interpretation of

religious liberty. Putting this tool into practice may help us to begin de-weaponizing faith in politics.

Endnotes

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