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A New Take on Religion and the LGBT Rights Movement

By Jonathan Coley

Review of: White, Heather R. 2015. *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Sociological studies of the LGBT rights movement have generally portrayed Christians as opponents of LGBT equality. Indeed, from at least the time of Anita Bryant's 1977 Save the Children campaign to repeal an ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in Dade County, Florida (Fetner 2001), conservative Christians in the United States have actively and visibly mobilized to oppose LGBT rights.

Those who have grown accustomed to hearing about Christians only in the context of countermovements against LGBT rights, then, will be surprised to learn the other side of the story – specifically, to learn about the critical role of mainline Protestants in facilitating early lesbian and gay organizing, as recounted in Heather White's eye-opening new book *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*.

As White recounts, beginning in the early 1950s, coastal cities with growing lesbian and gay populations, especially Los Angeles and San Francisco, became home to homophile organizations, which promoted the overturning of anti-sodomy laws and the integration of lesbian and gay people into society. These homophile organizations were for the most part more gentile in nature and more incrementalist in their goals compared to the gay liberation and lesbian feminist organizations that followed.

Embracing a politics of respectability, homophile activists often sought allies who could lend their organizations legitimacy, and mainline Protestant ministers (e.g., Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Church, and Episcopalian clergy) who were sympathetic to the plight of lesbians and gay often served this function. In the spring of 1964, for example, mainline Protestant ministers met with representatives from homophile organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis in a "Consultation on the Church and the Homosexual." Following the meeting, representatives created a new organization called the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (or CRH for short), one of the earliest examples of a "bridging organization" that sought to bridge gaps between homophiles and faith communities (Coley 2014) and the first organization in the U.S. to use the word "homosexual" in its name.

On New Year's Day 1965, the CRH then co-organized a costume ball to raise funds for and draw publicity to the homophile movement. When police showed up to photograph, harass, and even arrest some of those attending, a group of ministers stood outside to serve as shields. The actions by the police were an eye-opener for the ministers, and rather than leading to the movement's increased passivity (a fear often raised by outsider involvement in social movements), the subsequent involvement by clergy actually led to increased gay and lesbian militancy, as clergy provided "funding, meeting and office space, access to communication and publishing resources, and support for direct action advocacy" (p. 89). The events of New Year's Day 1965 were, in a way, San Francisco's Stonewall, leading to an outburst of gay and lesbian organizing in San Francisco and providing a model of clergy-homophile partnership for the CRH organizations that quickly popped up in other cities.

The story takes an event more surprising turn when White reaches the events of the Stonewall riots of 1969, a New York City bar raid credited as the touchstone event of the emerging gay liberation movement. Although gay liberationists have often been characterized as completely rejecting religion, White argues that liberal Protestants were important to early gay liberation organizing in many U.S. cities. The year after Stonewall, for example, New York City and Los Angeles activists held commemorations of the riots, with the Los Angeles commemorations taking the form of the nation's first gay pride parade. Christians who had formed a gay-friendly denomination known as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC; Kane 2013) were foundational to the planning of the parade, with the "MCC church choir march[ing] behind a convertible carrying Perry [the MCC's founder] and his lover while singing an enthusiastic rendition of 'Onward Christian Soliders'" (p. 150). After the parade, Perry held a hunger fast for gay rights that led to his arrest and to significant press coverage, providing an important boost to the movement's visibility. San Francisco would not begin holding its gay pride parade until 1972, but two ministers there spearheaded the planning for the parade.

More than serving as organizers for these new gay pride parades, mainline Protestants were partially responsible for giving visibility to the "Stonewall myth" itself – the notion that Stonewall was the pivotal event in the emergence of the broader LGBT movement in the U.S. (Armstrong and Crage 2006). Specifically, White argues that people of faith were among the "most enthusiastic purveyors of the Stonewall narrative" because "the story of a late-night bar raid—transposed through collective memory to Friday night instead of Saturday morning—recalled the familiar story of the Crucifixion, while the Sunday ritual of gay pride, in turn, evoked the twinned triumphs of the Exodus and Easter. The linked practice of 'coming out' rehearsed a narrative about a transformed self that recalled conversion and testimony" (p. 141).

Finally, Christians were responsible for many of the organizations that grew out of the early gay liberation movement. Mainline Protestants partnered with activists in many U.S. cities to open community centers that would support gay liberation groups, and the Metropolitan Community Church that gained such attention through L.A. Pride diffused rapidly throughout other U.S. cities and served as important bases for local organizing.

None of this is to deny the role of more conservative Christians in mobilizing against LGBT rights and effectively silencing many mainline Protestants in the decades that followed. It is also not to suggest that mainline Protestants were completely on the side of homophiles and gay liberationists in these early years. In fact, as White carefully documents, mainline Protestants' early efforts to overturn anti-sodomy laws often came more out of a desire to remove "the aura of forbidden (therefore exalted) mystery" from homosexuality (p. 79), which Protestants hoped would diminish homosexual desire itself, as well as a hope that they would be able "to address the problem of homosexuality in more rational and enlightened ways" (p. 79). Their social justice convictions, and some of these ministers' belief that same-sex relationships could be moral, came only after observing harassment by the police and getting to know lesbian and gay people on a deeper level. White shows that mainline Protestants were also, ironically, responsible for adding the word "homosexual" to the Bible in the 1940s.

White is a historian, so her goal is not to offer refinements of social movement theory; furthermore, because the book has a larger interest in mainline Protestant debates over gay rights, not all of the chapters are focused on social movements. Still, her book is an important read not only for those interested in LGBT movements but also for those interested in the relationship between religion and social change more generally. The book provides an important corrective to the overwhelming emphasis on religion's role in impeding LGBT rights, along with important historical context for many contemporary denominations' embrace of LGBT rights (e.g., Coley 2016, Whitehead 2013). Give it a read!

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