

## sex and fire:

### religion, homosexuality, and authority in Canada and the United States

by Michael Adams



CANADA'S SUPREME COURT RECENTLY declared that, should the federal government wish to proceed with same-sex marriage legislation, it should be encumbered only by its own fear of controversy—not by any constitutional constraints. This step toward same-sex marriage in Canada stands in sharp contrast to recent developments on the same issue in the United States, where constitutional bans on same-sex unions were favoured on November 2 by voters in 11 states (including two blue ones, Michigan and Oregon).

Opposition to homosexuality in general and gay marriage in particular, is indeed stronger and more vociferous in the United States than it is in Canada. In 2000, Reginald Bibby's Project Canada Survey Series and the General Social Survey respectively, asked Canadians and Americans their opinion of two adults of the same sex having sexual relations. About a third of Canadians (32%) responded that such behaviour was "always wrong"; the number in the United States was almost twice that: 59%.

Regarding same-sex marriage, a majority of Canadians are in favour: 58% according to the last Environics poll on the issue in October 2004. According to an Associated Press-Ipsos poll, the comparable number in the United States in November 2004 was 35%.

The most obvious and intuitive explanation for the disparity between Canada and the U.S. on this issue is the higher level of religiosity south of the border. Both the Pew Center and Reginald Bibby (a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge) have released research, linking religious affiliation and participation to opposition of same-sex marriage, a correlation which exists in both Canada and the United States. The Pew research suggests that Americans, whose religious leaders discuss homosexuality during religious services, are much more likely to have negative views of gays and lesbians. Professor Bibby's work (conducted in coop-

eration with the Vanier Institute of the Family) shows that both Canadians and Americans who attend church regularly, have been slower to accept homosexuality in general and same-sex marriage in particular.

Professor Bibby, in his recent paper "Ethos Versus Ethics: Canada, the U.S., and Homosexuality," claims that his findings offer evidence that to a great extent, Canadians' and Americans' values are rooted in their religious affiliations and activities, or lack thereof. In this analysis, it is the much higher level of religious participation in the United States (two in five Americans report that they attend church weekly, compared to one in five Canadians) which cause that country's substantially lower levels of tolerance for lesbians and gays, and consequently same-sex marriage.

On one hand, this seems intuitive. It is hard to dispute that Evangelical Christians who are told each Sunday that they have a duty to defend marriage against the assaults of secular judges and sinful citizens, are likely to be influenced by such messages. And United Church members who are told the opposite – that their duty as Christians is to uphold the vulnerable and the excluded (read: minority groups) as Jesus would – are surely likewise influenced. In both cases religious participation shapes adherents' values.

On the other hand, one might also argue that both the Evangelical and the

United Church member choose to hit the pews on Sunday morning and absorb the two vastly different messages being proffered. What causes them to make that choice? It seems clear that their pre-existing social values lead them to their places of worship (just as others' values keep them home reading the Sunday *New York Times*). We are no longer effectively compelled to attend the places of worship our parents did. Of course, there is considerable social

particular sets of values?

It would be very difficult to claim that religion and values do not shape one another in reciprocal fashion to some extent. In the ways I've just articulated, people's religious activities and their values interact and thus evolve in concert. But not all values are created equal. Some are more deeply held, and motivate people more strongly, than others.

The values that people hold around issues of homosexuality in general, and

slogan displayed on many a T-shirt and fender, "Hate is not a family value." True enough: hate is not a family value. But when a Republican says he or she believes in family values, while it is not implausible to assume that this person is intolerant of homosexuality and opposed to gay marriage, it is wrong to read intolerance as the essential meaning of the statement.

I believe the tussle over "family values" rhetoric gestures toward the core values that underlie the debate around same-sex marriage. One crucial cluster of values lies beneath Canadians' and Americans' divergent approaches to both same-sex marriage and religion: the values that constitute our orientations to authority. Whereas Professor Bibby positions religion as the force which drives homophobia, I believe orientation to authority is the "X factor" which drives both phenomena – religion and attitudes toward homosexuality.

One of the most surprising research findings in Canada and the United States is that Americans, with their traditions of individualism, distrust of government, and personal freedom, are now actually more deferential to authority than Canadians, with our traditions of group rights, institutional accommodation, and larger, more socialist government. Research indicates that Americans – particularly Republicans – are more likely to favour hierarchical organization of businesses, traditional father-led families, and the belief that younger people should automatically defer to older people.

One's orientation to authority is highly predictive of other beliefs and behaviours. For example, if you asked a group of people whether an organization works better when there is a strict hierarchy, as in the military, and divided those people into two groups according to their responses, you would likely be left with two groups holding distinct and coherent views on such concepts as duty, religion, patriotism, propriety,

**Americans—particularly Republicans—**are more likely to favour hierarchical organization of businesses, traditional father-led families, and the belief that younger people should automatically defer to older people.

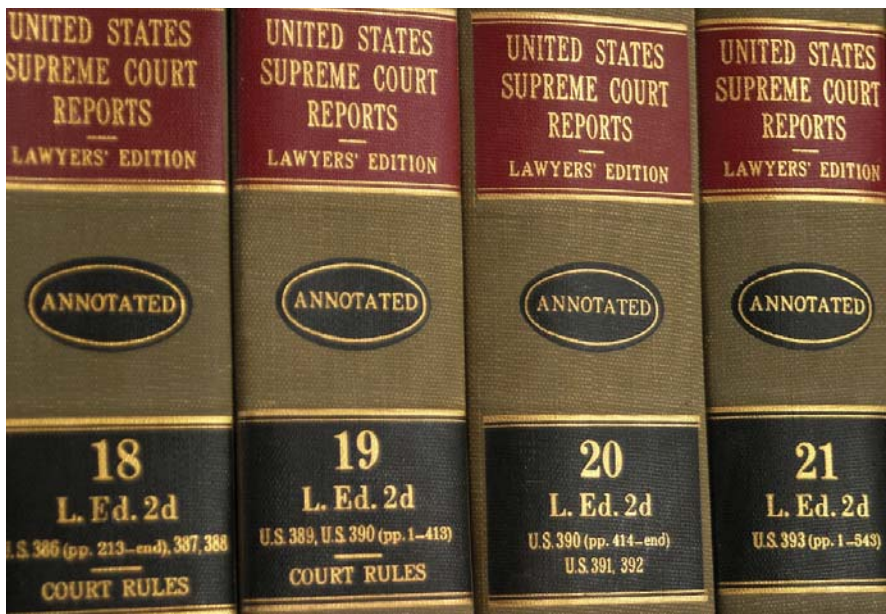


pressure in this regard in some communities, particularly in the United States, but by and large adults today choose the extent and type of religious practice they wish to pursue. People who are inclined to oppose same-sex marriage are also in many cases inclined to hear a religious leader affirm their views and assure them that they are on the side of righteousness (as opposed to bigotry, as the other side charges).

So, what is the direction of causality here? Do values beget people's religious affiliations, making modern religious congregations communities of choice, composed of people who share common values? Or do people's religious affiliations, with their prescriptions from sacred texts, interpretations of those prescriptions by trusted leaders, and community standards among fellow worshippers, cause them to adopt par-

same-sex marriage in particular, are not core values. They are rooted in core values, which is one reason why they arouse such passion, but no one constructs an entire worldview around the sanction or rejection of same-sex partnerships.

I am reminded of the 1992 Republican National Convention at which George Bush Sr. coined the term "family values." Among the Republican choir, "family values" connoted responsibility, fidelity, moral rectitude, and other goods which they saw as inextricably linked to the traditional, father-led nuclear family. Those who believed that those goods could also exist in other kinds of families resented the Republicans' political appropriation of the word 'family'. For them, "family values" seemed a cynical shorthand for homophobia and discrimination. Hence, the



family, and multiculturalism. Obviously, there would be some diversity within each group. But each group would be much more coherent in its values than it would have been had you used another question to create the initial split.

Research shows that the divide between red (Bush/Republican) and blue (Kerry/Democrat) America is heavily bound up in attitudes about authority. Environics social values research show that Bush voters are vastly more deferential to authority than Kerry supporters. They are also more religious and more attached to the idea of the traditional family. These three trends among Bush supporters reinforce one another heavily: a deferential person is more likely to accept without question the dictates of religious leaders (usually negative about homosexuality, as Pew research affirms empirically). Such a person is more likely to believe in the traditional father-led family, not only because that's what the authority figure at church advocates, but also because such a family structure offers a clear source of authority within the home. The religious leader and the strict father believe in and reinforce each other's legitimacy and importance in their re-

spective domains.

The traditional father-led family offers a ready and obvious power structure, which people who put their faith in authority figures see as essential to the proper function of any human group. The idea of a family whose founding couple are of the same gender not only offends the religious sensibilities often held by the deferential, but also disrupts their idea of a familial hierarchy in which there is one clear (male) leader, protector, provider, and disciplinarian. (It is not a coincidence that those who are highly deferential to authority also tend to have little interest in advancing gender equality. Here again, family equality offends the impulse toward hierarchy, even if the equal partners are of the opposite sex and thus seen as less objectionable than same-sex partners. In this analysis, Hillary Clinton is less degenerate than Ellen DeGeneres – but not much.)

What accounts for Americans' greater deference to authority? Paradoxically, the deferential tendencies Americans currently exhibit (and have been exhibiting since Environics began its surveys there in the early 1990s) are actually rooted in American individualism. Because the ideal of personal

freedom has been so integral to the construction of American life as it currently exists, Americans find themselves in a rich, creative, and exciting society, but also an unpredictable, frightening, and sometimes dangerous one.

The American ideal of self-reliance has resulted in very weak social supports for those who fall behind in the great American economic race: Americans know that if they get sick or hurt, or if the vicissitudes of the economy pitch them out of a job or vaporize their imprudently invested savings, they are not guaranteed help getting back on their feet. The historical American suspicion of government authority, which resulted in a constitutional provision for militias capable of violently overthrowing a tyrannical government, has resulted in a society flooded with firearms, where people kill themselves and each other with guns at ten times the rate Canadians do. The vast economic disparities the American winner-take-all system has produced have further eroded people's faith and interest in shared public goods, and Americans' fear of one another (and their lack of trust in the ability of government to protect them from one another) is evidenced by the popularity of gated communities and private security forces.

Despite the vast wealth and many impressive achievements of the United States, the factors I have just described do conspire to create a sense of insecurity among many Americans. Large segments of the U.S. population respond to this insecurity by fostering strong ties to traditional institutions such as churches, which may seem to promise some stability and sanctuary – an anchoring function – in a sometimes chaotic and threatening world. Religion offers, in addition, a mode of interpreting that world which promises that, whatever difficulties may befall you, a divine logic ultimately prevails.

Another attraction of churches is rooted in the mythic American proclivity for roaming the country in search of

a better life. While Americans no longer drive hard across the plain to seek fortune in the West as they once did (would-be American Idols notwithstanding), they do indeed relocate much more than citizens of other developed nations. In 2002, 14.2 per cent of Americans relocated. This is more than triple the usual number in Germany. Because the population is more mobile, there is a greater need in the United States for ready-made communities such as churches. Thriving churches provide much more than worship services: they provide recreational activities, educational opportunities, outlets for volunteerism and networking, a social life for stay-at-home moms, and so on. Some even include fitness centres to trim and tone the maculate flesh of the faithful. Churches, unlike neighbourhoods and workplaces, provide newcomers with a pool of potential friends who are essentially pre-screened for values – a great help for a family new in town, having followed dad to a better job or just the hope of one.

The longing for security amid uncertainty applies within the home as well. The idea of a strict, strong father who provides for his family, imposes order in the home, and also stands guard (armed if necessary) at the door, is a metaphor (if not a practice) that has considerable appeal in an uncertain social environment. For those without a strict father to call their own, the U.S. military is ready and waiting, promising education, personal betterment, and nothing if not discipline.

Economist Paul Krugman, in his column in the *New York Times*, has repeatedly expressed dismay and even astonishment at what he calls the “Just trust us” ethos of the Bush administration – and the American people’s failure thus far to react angrily against that ethos. But it may well be that, in the wake of 9/11, Americans’ insecurity – and thus their deferential tendencies – have reached such a pitch that they are



desperate to just trust someone. The someone on offer happens to be George W. Bush.

Most Canadians dislike George W. Bush not just because of his unilateralist militarism, but because he is the poster boy of a patriarchal, literalist, intolerant religiosity they find repellent. Theology (and ergo politics) à la Bush relies heavily on deference to authority, and this is one reason why Bush sells south of the border, to the genuine amazement of most Canadians and

millions of progressive Americans.

Stockwell Day, the last Canadian political leader who made the mistake of ostentatiously espousing his religiosity, found his Christian literalism a target of ridicule – it became a national joke that Day’s vision of history involved humans and dinosaurs chasing each other around the Garden of Eden. Leaders who have kept their religiosity out of politics have fared much better. On this, Pierre Trudeau is the model, not Stockwell Day. Indeed, a significant strategic issue for the new Conservative party seems to be keeping leader Stephen Harper’s religious beliefs well away from his persona and platform.

Canadians want their laws and their society to respect the decisions they make for themselves – and they also accept that they must extend such respect to others. They are less accepting than Americans of prescriptions and proscriptions from authority figures, or those who declare themselves proxies for God. Canadians value family, but don’t insist that all families look alike, and don’t envy the polarization that has taken place around this issue in the United States. In Canada, pragmatism trumps ideology, autonomy trumps authority, and tolerance trumps vitriol. Same-sex marriage will soon become a reality, if not this year then soon: among those currently in the 18 to 29 age bracket, 74 per cent favour same-sex marriage (as compared to 41 per cent of those over 60). Before long these young people will reach a critical mass in parliament, the courts, and at the polls. The same will probably eventually be true in the United States, where about 60 per cent of those under 30 favour gay marriage. But in Canada the battle will be quieter, gentler, less divisive, and over sooner.

*Michael Adams is founder of Environics Research, and President of the Environics Group of Companies. He can be reached at [madams@environics.ca](mailto:madams@environics.ca).*