

***First Amendment to the United States Constitution:***

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

The above text is among America's greatest contributions to the world. It does not contain an asterisk excluding gay people. All people are entitled to exercise their faith or lack of it without being bullied. This right may not be put to a vote. That is the whole point of rights.

America's diversity includes people of all races, creeds, walks of life, genders and sexual orientations. Mutual interest calls for us to coexist peacefully and respectfully. Religious fanatics are threatening that coexistence by aggressively pushing an agenda hostile toward women, racial and religious minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

LGBT people are part of this country. We are entitled to equal protection of the law and the pursuit of happiness as our birthright. We will not be bullied. We will make no excuses for politicians who pander to intolerance, or who say, "I support gay equality, but..." Those who treat us as second-class citizens do not deserve our votes, money, or volunteer time.

Right-wing claims about "traditional marriage" are astoundingly false. Here are features of a true Bible-based marriage law (with thanks to Sam Smith of *Progressive Review*):

1. Polygamy. Genesis 29:17-28; II Samuel 3:2-5
2. Concubines. II Samuel 5:13; I Kings 11:3; II Chronicles 11:21
3. Non-virginal brides executed. Deuteronomy 22:13-21
4. No mixed-faith marriages. Genesis 24:3; Numbers 25:1-9; Ezra 9:12; Nehemiah 10:30
5. No divorce. Deuteronomy 22:19; Mark 10:9
6. A man must marry his dead brother's widow. Genesis 38:6-10; Deuteronomy 25:5-10

When fundamentalists say these and other inconvenient passages no longer apply because they grew out of the exigencies of another time and place, they are making our argument for us, because the same is true of the passages they use to bash gay people.

There is nothing wrong with people proclaiming their faith publicly; the problem is when they seek to impose it on everyone else. When Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1), he was talking to bullies and hypocrites. Martin Luther King, Jr. used his faith to liberate people, not to bash or demonize them; that is the difference between him and the radical religious right, who have gone from attacking him to co-opting him.

People are not sheep. God gave us human brains, and we have the responsibility to honor that gift by thinking for ourselves. In any case, we have intellectual freedom in this country, and our civil government is based on the Constitution, not on the Bible. The bullies' repeated groundless assertions to the contrary do not change this.

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Jesus articulated the separation of church and state when He said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21) He also said, "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36) If the bullies used their scripture as a source of reflection instead of as a weapon against others, they would realize that Jesus would be horrified at what they do in His name.

The use of religion to justify prejudice or as a means of controlling others is not acceptable in a diverse and free society. Sloganeering about "religious freedom" to force your dogma on everyone else is an insult to the intelligence. Your religious freedom does not entitle you to deny others access to health care or to interfere with their health care decisions. It does not entitle you to disfavor faiths or families or ethnic groups of which you disapprove.

We refuse to let preachers of hate off the hook when others act on their inflammatory words and attack or kill LGBT people. Violence, harassment, and sexual assault are not funny nor are they inevitable rites of passage. They are not acceptable either in school or prison or within a relationship. Your advancement does not require putting your boot on someone else's neck.

The dispute between pro-gay and anti-gay forces is not symmetric. LGBT rights activists do not seek to deny anyone equal protection of the law, as our opponents do. We object to the false symmetry portrayed by many in the media. Bullies who are prevented from bullying do not thereby become victims. The radical religious right's claim of victimhood is not a mere disagreement; it is a lie.

We rebuke the wolves in shepherds' clothing, the predators and opportunists and authoritarians who presume to sermonize against us when their own moral authority is in shreds. They are not above the law and do not deserve the privilege they dishonor.

We say to the bullies: your freedom does not entitle you to take away ours. You cannot impose your faith on your neighbors, any more than they can impose theirs on you.

We say to self-loathing, closeted ministers: Stop your treachery. Stop trying to evade your personal issues by scapegoating us. A new, more enlightened generation is emerging that will not put up with your malignant mischief. Your days are numbered.

We say, on the other hand, to the many clergy who affirm our lives and loves: thank you. You are helping to point the way forward to a nation that lives up to its founding principles.

We are God's children and contributors to our communities who will not tolerate discrimination against our families in the name of religion. Nor are we anti-religious on that account. We know all the rhetorical tricks, and we are having none of it.

The tide is turning against those who call themselves "pro-family" while attacking families they don't like. We are committed to being part of that tide, and urge others to do likewise. Much is at stake for us, for those we love, and for our country.