

Cynthia Burack, "The Christian Right and SOGI (Sexual Orientation Gender Identity) Rights"

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Marie Griffith:

Well good afternoon everyone, we'll go ahead and get started. I'm Marie Griffith, I'm the director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and I just want to welcome you all here today for what I know will be a fantastic lecture. After the lecture, we'll have plenty of time for Q&A and then after I invite you all to stay, we have a reception out there in the lounge area just outside the room for about a half hour where you can meet the speaker and we can all mingle. Outside that door we also have a list and if anyone is not on our email list and would like to be for events and other kinds of things please sign up before you go and we also have some posters for some upcoming events that the center is sponsoring later this semester. We're also going to be screening a film on Reinhold Nyberg with Edith Seminary on March 3rd and then Bishop Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the episcopal church in April and other things like that so please take those as you wish. It's my pleasure to introduce Rebecca Wanzo who will be introducing our speaker today, it's been great working with Rebecca and a lot of other colleagues on this visit that we've got. Rebecca is an associate professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies here and she's the associate director of also the Center for the Humanities. So here she is to introduce our speaker.

Rebecca Wanzo:

So I want to thank Gail Booker and Debra and all the staff who worked hard to bring Cynthia here. I'm really thrilled to finally collaborate with Marie and bring Cynthia Burack to campus because we have been talking about this for a long time. Part of it was because I thought her work best exemplified intellectual commitments of the center that Marie has so brilliantly set forth because Cindy's thought really transgresses the fault lines in Sexuality studies and also makes extraordinary interventions in religious studies. When I first started working at Ohio State one of the first things we bonded over was my whispered confession that I have tearfully prayed for salvation from fear and trembling as a child after reaching the jack-tricked track that this is your life. Terrified of hell and that I was going to burn for eternity or be left behind when everyone was raptured away, and in the way of all good writers who were all good friends she outed that shame in an essay later. While I had found this somewhat shameful some of the things that Cindy brought to life was her shared religious experiences and her commonalities in unexpected places. The unexpected connection in fact is a hallmark for her impressive collection of publications. Long before scholars were talking about ugly feelings Cindy's *The Problem of the Passions* took away the

tension between the ethics of care and feminist rage. Abdullism that haunted the political and theoretical frameworks but was rarely articulated. She uses psychoanalysis in her work, bringing that body of literature to political theory which is not always and maybe it's fair to say doesn't really now tell how psychoanalytic theory can speak to analytic connections in that field. In her next monograph, *Healing Identities*, she brought psychoanalysis to a discussion of how African American women do political work in groups and negotiate power. It was such an unusual but generative analytical juxtaposition, she won the Gredeva book award for the national association for the advancement of psychoanalysis. And as powerful as her early work was, her discussions were as powerful in regard to the religious right where I think she made some of her most important intellectual interventions. Since *Sex and Democracy*, anti-gay rhetoric and the Christian right are both moving revealing that anti-gay activism lacks any logic, instead she painstakingly describes the Christian right's theology and ideology which builds upon a complex of the first set of traditions and epistemologies and that LGBT rights people must be attentive to the complexity of these traditions to transform the conversation we have about this conflict. Similarly, tough love, compassion, sexuality, and the Christian right addresses leftists' criticisms that the right's compassion isn't compatible with certain policy commitments by illustrating the genealogy of intellectual frameworks that determine care. I'm excited to hear more about this recent transnational term and her scholarship that began with the Simon Hall's Research Fellowship which she received at the University of Manchester. Her work always challenges me to rethink the assumption or more frankly help me realize that I'm totally wrong but in a way that models the compassion and generosity she shows for all of the people she studies so please join me in welcoming Cindy Burack, Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State University.

Cynthia Burack:

I have to say that Rebecca Wanzo gives the greatest introductions in the world, I heard her a number of years ago introduce Judith Butler and I thought "oh my god, an introduction can never be more beautiful than that." But that was really lovely thank you. I'd also like to thank the folks that brought me in to give this lecture this afternoon and also a seminar tomorrow. So I believe that that is a law, identity, and culture initiative of Washington University Law and the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. I would also like to thank Marie and Rebecca and also particularly Gail who was so lovely in organizing my visit. So, my talk this afternoon is about a project that I've been working on for about 4 years. It has about two parts. In the first part, I reconstruct, and I believe this is for the first time, the history of US government SOGI human rights initiatives, programs, and policies. In the second part, I place this advocacy this US government advocacy for SOGI human rights in the context of US domestic debates in the context of US social support for SOGI human rights. In fact, there are two kinds of opposition for US support for SOGI human rights abroad. Tonight, I'm going to be talking

about the first kind which is opposition from the Christian right and at the political theory seminar tomorrow I'm going to be talking about the second kind which is opposition from a particular piece of the academic left. So when this is done I'm happy to entertain questions not just what I'm talking about this afternoon but about anything that you think would be in the scope of this project. I want to get started this evening by giving you a sense about how my argument is going to go. First, I'm going to introduce the primary conception of Christian human rights. From there, I'll analyze two closely related rhetorical, political, and pedagogical strategies that the Christian right, the US conservative movement has adopted to undermine and delegitimize the court for SOGI rights abroad. The first strategy involves appropriating and reframing the left progressive charge that US discourse and interventions about parts of the world constitute imperialism. The second strategy is making common cause with people abroad who reject SOGI human rights and framing these beleaguered foreign allies as victims of US power who have the right to their traditional beliefs and practices. Of course, there is a historical irony of the Christian right in the harms enacted by US imperialism. This is the role of Christian missionaries in displacing indigenous religious beliefs and functioning and western colonial emissaries. This history is effectively erased in the context of contemporary alliances between US and indigenous anti-LGBTQ and anti-SOGI actors. Finally, I'll argue that the Christian right increasingly found itself in enacting the end of cultural relativism that has unanticipated but possibly unavoidable implications and side effects. In recent decades, the Christian right has encountered what appears to be an intractable problem with its anti-LGBTQ politics in the US and this problem is a gradual but unmistakable rise in support for inclusion and equal treatment for LGBTQ people. The various leaders and groups in the Christian right have responded to changes in these attitudes in a variety of ways. Some, along the way, have resigned themselves to defeat on the cultural issues but I think the Trump administration has definitely re-energized these early resigners. Others have insisted that Christian conservatives will ultimately prevail. Many organizations, leaders, and activists have responded to an increasingly challenging cultural domestic environment by moving their attention and operations to outside the US that seem to hold more promise for implacable antagonism to LGBTQ rights. Many of these US based anti-SOGI missionaries have become recognized as experts on the LGBTQ people in the nations abroad. So the title of my talk today is "No Human Right to Sodomy" I take this title from a 2014 essay from Scott Lively who is an anti-LGBTQ pastor and attorney in the US. Lively's played an important role in instilling a hostile attitude toward LGBTQ people abroad especially in Russia and Uganda. In his essay, Lively positively professed official Russian policy against same-sex sexuality and LGBTQ human rights and asserted, this was before Donald Trump, that Russia would be the greatest defender of true human rights among nations. Those of us who were adults in the 1980s may hear echoes of a similar phrase from the majority opinion of 1986 Supreme Court case *Bowers v. Hardwick*. Writing for the majority saying just as the US constitution stated, the constitution doesn't infer a fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy. International activism against LGBTQ people, same-sex sexuality, and non-normative identity has required the formation of new alliances and the constant development of new rhetorics and

practices. Most Christian conservatives in the US probably aren't well informed Christian right advocacy in international networks and institutions but they know what's important and that is the great global struggle between good and evil is afoot and that some conservative believers are engaged in every front of that struggle. A major theme in diverse forms of Christian conservative and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric across borders is religious liberty. For these believers, religious liberty and SOGI human rights exist in mutually exclusive zero-sum relation to each other. When one gains, the other ones must necessarily lose. To understand the Christian right movement's orientation of specifically SOGI human rights, we have to investigate the orientation toward the doctrine of human rights itself. Judging by the discourse produced by Christian conservative movement, Christian conservatism is two minds about human rights—what they are and how Christian conservatives should look at them and they are constantly engaging in pedagogy or socialization with members of their movement about how to think about these human rights claims. The perspective is the human rights are specious, a deplorable fiction, a human construct like the separation of church and state. In contrast to the natural rights embraced by America's founders, they believe human rights have been manufactured by modern social engineers so while natural rights are endowed by god and don't change over time human rights constantly change and give rise to a new cottage industry of social and economic rights that are formulated and defended by international bureaucrats. While the natural rights of individuals they believe can be satisfied without infringing on someone else's rights, human rights require government so powerful as to crush the natural rights and liberty of individuals. While natural rights respect individuality, human rights that recognize categories of identity includes race, sex, or gender identity inevitably undermine the humanity of those they aspire to protect. Finally, Christian right discourse holds that treaties among nations erode national sovereignty by subjecting American to spurious standards of international human rights. So that's one perspective on human rights. There's a second perspective on human rights that I think is also quite important for SOGI human rights. This one is more complex as simple rejection as well as more likely to be deployed in instances where there is a pragmatic appeal to human rights that can pay off for the Christian conservative movement and this is selectively affirming human rights. The Christian conservative movement does not jettison the concept and application of human rights, instead, Christian right actors occasionally invoke and employ conventions of human rights including even international human rights treaties generally anathema to conservatives. What justifies recourse to human rights here in the second perspective is the reality or perception that some people are menaced on their faith—especially their Christian faith. These contrasts between natural and human rights show that for Christian conservatives the doctrine of human rights is not benign, rather, a shared international regime of human rights threatens individual human beings and threatens the sovereignty of Christian America and it threatens the morally righteous cultures of many nations. I'll return to that later. These two perspectives on human rights aren't exclusive to their own constituencies, instead, these represent a set of choices that Christian conservatives can easily move back and forth between depending on the political needs of the moment. Either human rights are a human

construct that is not founded in god's will or it is and it consists of the right to religious beliefs and worship. For this purpose, the key bridge on initiatives of human rights is that human rights doctrine can never violate natural law or natural rights because natural rights are god given and proceed the establishment of government. So both perspectives reject both interpretations of human rights that incorporate, for example, second generation social and economic rights. Social and economic rights are inconsistent with the economic and natural law beliefs of Christian conservative elites. Also violating natural law are variations of sexual behavior and gender identity that are inconsistent with the movement's ideal of the natural family. This model of the family, which consists of a married husband and wife and their biological children, is ordained by god. Christian conservative approach human rights in different ways at different times. They repudiate discourse and identifies LGBTQ people as victims of human rights violations or that specifically advocates for their inclusion in human rights protections. To do otherwise would be to concede to identities and practices that Christian conservatives abhor. That's human rights in general. So now I'd like to turn to SOGI human rights.

During the Obama administration, major themes of Christian right discourse were the administration's support for LGBTQ civil and human rights and the administration's lack of interest in persecution and human rights violations against Christians. And when I say that this is a common theme I mean that as a subscriber to many Christian-right organizations, I received messages to this particular problem every single day either in the mail or by my email inbox. The claim was the Obama administration refused to intercede on behalf of threatened religious minorities or threatened Christian believers. The claim that Obama refused to publicly declare the reality of persecution on the basis of religion was common. The message the movement consistently conveyed was that leftists, unbelievers, democrats, Obama, and Hillary Clinton catered to LGBTQ people but did nothing to protect embattled Christians that is to those people to whom Christians properly belong. The framing was fraught with empirical inaccuracy but that did nothing to constrain Christian and conservative messaging. For example, it was Bill Clinton who signed the International Religious Freedom act into law in 1998. The State Department appointed its first ambassador at large and special envoy for international religious freedom and generated the first annual report on international religious freedom in 1999, which means also during the Clinton administration. During Obama's administration, the state department appointed a special advisor for religious minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. Finally, the State Department's Bureau of Human Rights and Labor advocates for SOGI human rights as well as for the religious freedom and endangered religious minorities including Christians abroad. The same office at the State Department does both of these tasks— looks into religious violations and religious freedom and religious human rights and SOGI human rights. As far as Christian conservatives, the movement is concerned at least during the Obama administration

