

## There are Two Kinds of Liberals in the United States: Which Are *You*?

By Jacob Hess

In early 2015, NPR Weekend Edition shared an interview with a man and woman who claimed to be happily married despite his feelings of attraction towards men. The details of their story were not unlike many other similar stories shared of men or women who experience same-sex attraction (or identify as gay), but identify more strongly with faith commitments leading them to prioritize the pursuit of an opposite-sex spouse.

More than the story itself, what *was especially* remarkable was the commentary this story sparked.<sup>1</sup> Among the many things that were said, one theme stands out – especially in the wake of mounting socio-political political hostilities in the U.S. Namely this: outrage among respondents *that this story was even allowed to be aired*:

- “NPR has shown great irresponsibility and can potentially be responsible for the continuing abuse and misunderstanding of issues surrounding homosexuality. NPR, you have disappointed me and countless others.”
- “I found this story to be disturbing and a disservice to the LBGT community....I am angry at NPR for even doing this piece.”
- “I am shocked at the irresponsibility of NPR to feature this story...What a terrible message to send to ANYONE struggling with their sexual identity! What a shameful thing to publish, NPR. Awful.”
- “Honestly, I'm pretty disgusted with the way NPR gives equal voices to small, ignorant and hateful groups and individuals. What's next, the world according to David Duke?”

For conservative onlookers, the alarming take-away goes something like this: the willingness for public radio to share a religious conservative couple's experience has now become “reckless” – and tantamount to popularizing dangerous ideologies such as *white supremacy*.<sup>2</sup>

**The *other* liberals.** What intrigued me most was another (clearly liberal) voice evident throughout the comment thread – in sharp contrast with the conclusions of those other (louder, angrier) liberal commentators. This included, for instance:

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<sup>1</sup> With my qualitative research background, I couldn't resist content analyzing some of the many patterns in the comment thread on the NPR website!

<sup>2</sup> Given the many other nasty things said about this man and his wife, conservative reactions were somewhat predictable:

- “I'm so glad to see [man's] faith and sexuality being respected by all the commenters on here. After all, values like tolerance and acceptance are the cornerstones of liberal-progressive philosophy.”
- “The rancor that progressives are leveling at this man is ridiculous...so much for lip service that the left gives to civil rights and tolerance.”
- “And they claim they are for equal rights.... It looks like, for the most part, tolerance only runs one way...See their true color?”

- “How is a man telling his own story shameful?...He is not calling for discrimination or hatred against openly gay people, he is just talking about his own journey.”
- “I am amazed at the amount of hate and ridicule that he is getting for this. He doesn't even want to stop other gay-inclined people from doing what they want to do. He made a personal decision about what HE wanted in HIS life.”
- “Whether or not this man is trying to ward off his attraction to men, and whether or not his fulfilling that attraction is inevitable, it IS their choice to make as consenting adults. I don't see how it is rational to embrace marriage equality without giving this couple the same consideration as would be given to any other married couple.”
- “If gay people should be free to act on their sexual desires, why can't this person feel free to act on his religious desires?...I respect his decision just as I would if he had chosen to live his life with a male partner....Aren't we over-emphasizing the potential danger from him sharing this?”<sup>3</sup>

Others said the following:

- “Well, I for one support NPR's decision to showcase different points of view, even those I do not agree with.”
- “I respect NPR's decision to grant time to this unpopular side of the argument....In fact, as a taxpayer funded public institution, NPR does have the responsibility to air views that may conflict with your own.”

It was clear, once again, that most of these latter commentators were decidedly in favor of gay rights...and yet, they felt remarkably different about whose voice and story should be allowed as an acceptable part of American public discourse.

**The big disagreement.** And it is *that difference* I hold up as *so significant* that it represents a fundamental, even existential dividing line among liberal and progress-leaning Americans today - centered on two basic questions:

1. Are you outraged enough by conservative convictions on sexuality (or anything else), that you're willing to work and agitate for their perspective and voice to become removed from public discourse?
2. Despite discomfort and even sharp disagreement with conservative convictions, are you willing to work to preserve collective, public space where these differences have room to interface and continue to compete?

By the way, I believe virtually *all* the progressive or liberal-leaning classmates, co-authors, collaborators and friends I've had over the years would answer “no” to the first question – and “yes” to the second.

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<sup>3</sup> This individual went on to say, “The legal argument for the decriminalization of sodomy was that this was an act between consenting adults that did not affect others. The argument for redefining marriage was the same: nobody else is affected when Adam and Steve get married. But come across somebody not acting on his sexual attraction, and the argument becomes, ‘I'm concerned about the message Mr. Edwards [who is also a Pastor] is sending to young homosexuals in his congregation.’”

How do I know this? Because they have genuinely *welcomed* my voice and heard me out over the years as a conservative colleague.<sup>4</sup> From where I stand, *these* progressives are in a qualitatively different category from *those other* progressives (whose responses to these questions are flipped).

Clearly, there are many other progressive diversities we *might* talk about: How far left should the democratic party go right now? What tactics provide democrats the best chance of regaining power – and how best do you explain why the left lost a presidential campaign most everyone thought they would win in the first place?

Far more than these important other differences among left-leaning Americans today, however, I would argue that the issue of *who-gets-to-participate-in-open-democratic-society* is the most significant.

Why is that?

In part, because it helps explain the ascendancy of President Donald J. Trump.

**Trump wins because conservatives are scared their voice is no longer allowed.** That's not just my assessment. It's the conclusion of [a number of left-leaning scholars](#) who have been warning – and continue to warn – about the inadvertent consequences of a full-on “let's fight *all* those conservative-bigots” social justice warrior mantra.

Especially this one: when we conservatives feel that and hear you say that, we (accurately) recognize we're in an existential fight – like, for our cultural survival and our basic “freedom” to live out our most precious faith convictions.<sup>5</sup>

And we'll do anything to keep that liberty – including, well, otherwise extreme things: Like electing Donald Trump and continuing to “support” him ([against all seeming morality and rationality](#)).

As [Conor Friedersdorf wrote](#) in the Atlantic soon after the election, “Conservatives feared that if Hillary Clinton was elected there would be no breaks on the advance of her coalition's agenda...Whether rationally or irrationally, they could not be persuaded that there were sufficient

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<sup>4</sup> Most of my closest friends and colleagues in both dialogue and mindfulness work are liberal and progressive-leaning. I not only adore them - but I envy aspects of progressivism that we could learn from as conservatives (e.g., a willingness to question, to challenge the status quo, to make abundant space for uncertainty). After a decade of work together and hundreds of hours, people like Joan Blades, Phil Neisser, Tracy Hollister, Elaine Shpungin, Nicole Allen, Wendy Heller - I find these people to be some of most kind and impressive human beings I know – good-hearted, virtuous, moral, and magnanimous.

<sup>5</sup> I know how this might sound to those who currently feel threatened under the current Republican administration - especially refugees and immigrants. None of the foregoing denies this angst, fear and heartache, nor am I trying to compare them, since there are compelling reasons to prioritize minority fears today (over the angst of a group with a history of power in America). The fear is real on both sides - and I believe it's possible to understand and hear both out fully.

institutional constraints on immigration policy, the federal government's new role in health care, or the pace of social change in a country where President Obama began his tenure opposed to gay marriage and ended it making federal policy on transgender rights."

Contrary to more sinister explanations, this can partly be explained by some basic fight-and-flight physiology: When someone feels cornered, he or she *does not act rationally*, right? And, as strange as it might sound to those who see conservatives as having enjoyed a glut of power, we conservatives came, during the latter part of the Obama administration, to feel not only cornered, but profoundly threatened (*not* simply by "the ascendancy of a black man to the presidency," but by the cultural revolution this man helped to usher in).<sup>6</sup>

Imagine your most important faith convictions coming to be, in the space of only a few years, re-framed as repulsive bigotry - not just in an abstract way, but with tangible and dramatic consequences: seeing conservatives fired from major positions for publicly supporting traditional marriage (Mozilla, Olympic chief), and with a *surprising amount of talk* comparing us to the KKK and advocating ways to actively shame, blacklist and constrain the role of religiously motivated Americans (and remember, all this was well before Trump came along!).

**Puncturing the vacuum.** Clearly, those are not sentiments all liberal-leaning Americans share - maybe not even most. And that's *precisely the point*: you're not the same!

But that's sure not coming across these days. Just as we're hearing from a disappointingly few conservatives-like-me with deep concerns about President Trump right now (when you are feeling so fearful), so also we heard from *precious few of you* amidst our our fear and alienation in the sea of social justice rhetoric under President Obama.

And in the relative absence of these two quieter voices within their respective tribes, a dangerous kind of vacuum has emerged - in which strange things happen...like the last two years of American politics! (and who-knows-what is still to come).

The answer to a dangerous vacuum, of course, is to puncture it! On this point, Quentin Cook encouraged those who felt silenced in America's conversation today to speak up: "When this is done, it creates a pause in the discourse and *allows people to evaluate where they stand on a particular matter.*" By contrast, "Silence allows the rhythm of negativity to continue uninterrupted and unchallenged."

**The big question.** So how will you channel your passion? Do you speak and act in a way that exerts *pressure* for others to conform? Are you willing to use aggressive tactics to get others to embrace your own platform - or silence those who disagree?

Or are you willing to fight for something much better - even the preservation of the American tradition of robust pluralism, where you can I can disagree about God, government, taxes,

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<sup>6</sup> This isn't just one guy's opinion. There is a [lot of data being overlooked](#) that contradicts the idea that the Trump victory embodies a resurgent white supremacy in America.

immigration, foreign policy, death penalty, marijuana, healthcare, climate, environment, guns, abortion, sexuality, and identity itself – while agreeing to still respect each other as fellow countrymen-and-women.

Clearly this is not simply a disagreement among liberals. As illustrated in [this parallel essay](#), the conflict over a willingness to aggress vs. keep public space open is happening within conservatism as well.

Are *you* willing to work for pluralism? Or will you fight against my ability (and the ability of religious conservatives as a whole) to be a continued participant in the American experiment?

Because depending on where you fall on *this single question* is what matters most to conservatives like me.

So, to all those identifying as “liberal” in America today, I would ask: What kind of liberal *are YOU?*