

*The Fairness Project Series*

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***When You're  
Having a  
Religious  
Argument***

## When You're Having a Religious Argument

It used to be common to hear: “If you want to get along with people, never argue religion or politics.” That would be fine.

The problem is that many people won't hesitate at all to use religious arguments for numerous social issues, one of which is the full acceptance and affirmation of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual and transgender people.

Getting drawn into any religious argument can be maddening enough. It's worse when you're arguing with zealous and convinced religious people who frame their anti-gay arguments in religious terms. Who hasn't gotten caught up in arguments with people who unceasingly cite scripture, traditions, religious authorities, and even the Divine itself? Who hasn't left such arguments feeling frustrated, angry, ill-prepared, or just plain inadequate?

Responding effectively to religious objections isn't in itself difficult. It doesn't require you to be an expert in religion. It need not even get you caught up in religious arguments themselves.

An appropriate and effective response requires four key elements:

- personal clarity about what we are doing when we argue,
- recognition of some key dynamics of religions we'll face,
- realization of certain basic facts behind religious arguments,
- willingness to affirm personal responsibility for the positions we hold.

### **I. Recognize, admit, face, and heal our own relationships to past experiences (positive and negative) with religions**

Doing the difficult inner work of cleaning up the effects of past

personal experiences with religions enables clear thinking, and creative and educational responses to the religious person who confronts us. Our emotional attachments from the past with which we have not sufficiently dealt often find us feeling angry, guilty, hurt, obsessed, personally attacked, and otherwise emotionally triggered.

Recognize that anyone growing up in our culture receives widespread and general religious abuse. The most pervasive form of American religion is that of televangelists, right-wing ministers, and ultra-conservative religious authorities who confront people with threats, humiliation, negative and demeaning self-valuation, subordination to others, denial of our own insights, and a variety of tactics meant to protect religious institutions and authorities. Even people who did not identify with the religious position grow up with such abuse in our culture because it is constant, widespread, dominant, and multi-dimensional.

To become clear in our responses and to stop being triggered by religious arguments, we may, frankly, require therapy or support of some sort. It's not mere humor when people say: "I'm a recovering \_\_\_\_\_." You fill in the religion or denomination.

**Religion functions as an addiction for many people.** Like all addictions, it keeps its "addicts" from facing and feeling their own emotional and psychological issues. In fact, religions often dictate how people should "really" feel instead. Addictions require "intervention," but we've been taught instead to be nice "enablers" for the addict. Even fighting against religion can become an addiction.

Doing our own personal healing work will enable us to be clear about what is motivating us to participate in a religious argument. It will help us answer important personal questions about our own relationship to religion, whether we are religious or not:

- Why does this issue or this particular argument matter to me?
- What emotional need am I meeting by arguing about religion?
- What keeps me from walking away or ignoring the source?
- Why am I doing this now, in this place, with this particular person?
- Why must they change? Why does that matter to me? Why do I care about their beliefs, particularly if I frankly disagree?
- Why am I remaining in a religious community that does not agree with me on this issue and would rather have me go away?

- Am I staying in this institution, with these people, or in this community for the same reasons abused spouses stay with their abusers?
- When do I determine that it's time for me to leave?

## II. Understand clearly the claims of many religions that religious people use but historians know to be inaccurate

**1. The claim that their religion is unchanging.** Even though it is historically untrue, religious people and institutions often claim that their current position:

- has never been affected or influenced by outside cultural elements and biases — it just dropped directly from heaven,
- has never been disputed throughout the religion's entire history,
- is *the* traditional teaching,
- is an example of the fact that views on such important matters of religion never really change.

In reality, official histories are rewritten, interpreted, or selected in order to portray the unchanging nature of their current position. Though religious people often deny this, all religions have at times accepted LGBT people and at other times they have not.

**2. The claim that it's not their interpretation.** People who argue from religion often claim that “the scriptures say,” “the tradition teaches” or “God says” whatever the culturally dominant anti-gay interpretation of those scriptures or tradition is.

This is coupled with denial that their position even is an interpretation, denial that a variety of interpretations existed in the past, and denial that a variety of understandings is possible in the present. They label their current interpretation “traditional,” “orthodox,” “mainstream,” “the Truth,” or “what it says.”

This claim absolves anti-gay critics from accountability for their own positions and interpretations. It enables them to deny that their own prejudices are the real issue or are even involved.

They can assert that they are not responsible for their views about LGBT people. God is responsible, the scriptures, or the tradition. Essentially, making this claim protects them from examining their own position. They don't have to own it as their own. They're saying: “I wouldn't be against gay people, but God is. So I have to be against gay people. You see, I'm the nice guy. God's the rat.”

**3. The claim that pro-gay is anti-Truth.** Anti-gay religious critics portray pro-LGBT positions and understandings as somehow illegitimate and unworthy of any serious consideration with labels used as put-downs in our conservative culture, such as: “modernism,” “revisionism,” “liberalism,” “secularism,” “biased,” “based in an agenda,” “from outsiders,” “anti-Christian,” “un-American.”

**III. Come to the discussion with these realizations about religious arguments:**

**1. It’s all been said before.** Every argument that you confront today has been made and answered repeatedly for decades. Yet people still restate them again and again with a numbing and overwhelming quality that can wear down respondents who are kept busy refuting them each time they’re repeated. The critics seem to make little if any progress. Respondents feel they must answer them each time. So the respondents are preoccupied and often end up worn out. Wearing us down is intentional.

On the psychological front, for example, *for almost a half of a century* all the major psychological organizations have rejected the idea that homosexuality is a problem. They also reject as unprofessional and harmful any attempts at changing someone’s sexual orientation and instead call their members to work to end anti-gay prejudice. The psychological debate is therefore finished. But you wouldn’t think so from the repetition of so-called psychological arguments by anti-gay people. In reality, they are the ones who should be on the defensive for their anti-scientific, unprofessional, and harmful activities.

See: “Case Closed: Responding to Psychological Arguments Against Gay People” in *The Fairness Project Series*.

**2. All the responses are readily available.** They’re in print and on-line for truly interested seekers. Anti-gay proponents, especially those most vocal, usually refuse to read gay-affirming literature, to consider opposing arguments or statistics, or to listen to gay-affirming people.

**3. Anti-gay critics prefer no discussion at all.** Anti-gay organizations and institutions do all they can to stifle any discussion, consideration, or education of the issue that does not affirm their anti-gay position. To them, being “objective” is promoting only their view and their use of religious jargon is meant to stifle discussion.

**4. Anti-gay religious critics *begin with the rejection of any pro-gay position.*** They come to the discussion objecting to anyone

or any argument (“the gay agenda”) that seeks to portray homosexuality as a “normal” human condition. Since they begin there, they automatically, and from the start, might write off anyone who takes a gay-affirmative position.

**5. The dominant religious position in any society reflects and sanctifies that society’s prejudices.** Observers call this “the religion of the culture” because this religion is one of the institutions that support the maintenance of the dominant socio-economic-cultural system. When a society’s prejudices and institutions change in a persuasive and overwhelming way, religion usually changes, though it may often lag far behind all else. But, unlike science, religion often has still to appear as if it is unchanging.

**6. Positions not arrived at logically are seldom relinquished because of logical argument.** Biblical interpretations that were not arrived at through personal, historical biblical analysis are seldom changed by objective biblical analysis. Most religious positions and interpretations of scriptures and traditions were received from authorities in whom people placed their faith, authorities who were enmeshed in institutions significant to their members, authorities who are “supposed to know.”

**7. The real issues are deeper and heavily emotional.**

Identification with a religion goes deeper than issues of the truth or falsity, the rightness or wrongness of beliefs, doctrines, ideas, and teachings. This means you are dealing with much deeper issues related to the benefits religions provide, benefits that are emotionally difficult to relinquish:

- a community of acceptance;
- a settled definition of who the person is as a human being, as a man or as a woman;
- a sense of certainty in the midst of a fast-changing world where change seems frightening;
- a view of reality that may include eternal punishment for any dissenters;
- identification with one’s parents, one’s ethnic identity, or a shared set of past human struggles and accomplishments;
- a “comfortable” familiarity with psychological dynamics found in organizations and relationships that often reproduce those in their own dysfunctional families of origin;
- a chance to affirm spirituality or something larger or more

than they find in the material world;

- the emotional, psychological, and other rewards and respectability associated with leadership;
- a chance for men in particular to live in a freer space that accepts attributes and interests that the surrounding culture considers “unmanly, sissy, gay, queer.”

### **8. Changing one’s position on this issue involves “repentance”**

— a major personal, emotional, and institutional admission of wrong accompanied by a change of direction. Instead of real repentance, many might be tempted to settle for tolerating “those unfortunate LGBT people” while adjusting some of their teachings.

The difficulty of the task is reflected in the fact that it would require people to admit much that is difficult to face:

- admitting one has been wrong all along, often wrong publicly;
- recognizing that trusted “authorities” (theological, historical, biblical, psychological, and pastoral) were not correct on this subject, and so may be mistaken about other matters;
- confronting their personal responsibility for the past and present-day rejection, hurt, violence, and destruction of gay people that their rhetoric has fed and their actions have caused;
- letting go of favorite anti-gay interpretations of the scriptures and the religion’s tradition, and accepting the interpretations of other scripture and religion scholars whom they currently criticize for disagreeing with them;
- fully accepting their own sexual orientations (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual) as divinely-given and, for some, facing their own non-heterosexual orientation;
- redefining entrenched gender roles and thereby ending, in particular, the subordination of the “feminine” to the “masculine” and women to men;
- abandoning the convenient scapegoating of LGBT people and LGBT clergy while taking personal responsibility for their own part in the problems that plague straight sexuality, families, relationships, marriages, children, and society, and searching for new solutions to those problems;
- foregoing all the attention, followers, and income raised through the scare tactics of the anti-gay industry for anti-gay leaders, “counselors,” ministers, causes, and “ministries.”

#### IV. Get down to the real issues beneath religious arguments

Some practical suggestions:

**1. No longer argue scriptures, religious traditions, doctrines, institutional stands, etc.** Sincere inquirers will be interested in searching out alternative understandings and will ask for more information. Instead of arguing, let them know that alternative information is available if they are interested.

“All of those arguments (interpretations, claims, assertions) have been discussed before. Would you like to know of some books to read?”

“What would you believe about gay people if the Bible said nothing about it?”

**2. Recognize you do not have to be a scholar, an expert, or have a perfect response.** See the discussion as a learning experience.

**3. Be completely clear that you *personally* do not agree** with anti-gay prejudice, rhetoric, interpretations, doctrines, scriptural passages, institutions, etc.

**4. Maintain a continuous, persistent, clear, concise, accountable response** to arguments. Do not hesitate to repeat them again and again as if you are jumping up and down in the same place.

“No, I don’t agree.”

“No, I think that is wrong.”

“I know people interpret the scripture that way, but I don’t.”

Then, repeat.

**5. Don’t get hooked**, but do notice when you personally get caught up emotionally in the discussion of the issue, even if these emotions seem “justified” (“righteous anger”). Find out why you were personally hooked. Consider this a learning experience about yourself.

Remember: “If I have stuff with someone else’s stuff, that’s my stuff.”

**6. Notice when you get caught up in various personal needs** such as the need to “win” an argument or the need to get someone to agree with you. Ask yourself: Why is that important to me?

**7. Feel free to walk away** and leave. You don’t have to answer them. You don’t have to represent the LGBT community. Give yourself permission to leave and then treat yourself gently for doing so.

At times religion, like science, has been a force for the liberation and affirmation of people. When religion supports justice for the oppressed, it is liberating today for many. But at other times both religion and science have been used to support the biases, prejudices, and oppressions found in societies.

Changing cultural prejudices is our goal. It's a long-term one.

Effectively challenging people to face their prejudices requires recognition that arguing religion is often a way not to face deeper issues. That's why taking responsibility for the positions we hold, without having to rely on the support of "authorities," is a way not only to affirm our own worth but also to call other people to eventual accountability for their own prejudices toward LGBT people. And prejudices, fears, and insecurities are often hidden behind religious arguments.

### Further Reading:

Candace Chellew-Hodge. *Bulletproof Faith: A Spiritual Survival Guide for Gay and Lesbian Christians*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

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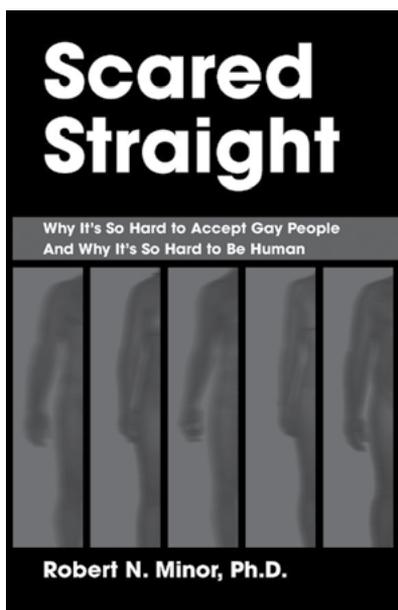
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Lambda Literary Award Finalist  
Independent Publisher Book Award Finalist  
"Book of the Week" – [www.menstuff.org](http://www.menstuff.org)

The real issue isn't sex. It's not sexual orientation. It's not the Bible, religion, or "traditional values." It's about growing up in the U.S.A.



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*-White Crane Journal*

## **SCARED STRAIGHT**

Why It's So Hard to Accept Gay People  
And Why It's So Hard to Be Human.

by Robert N. Minor, Ph.D.

Available at your favorite local bookstore  
or online at: [www.FairnessProject.org](http://www.FairnessProject.org)

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