

Theocracy Alert

What's 'mental health' in a theocracy?

By Mel Seesholtz, Ph.D.

Online Journal Contributing Writer

July 6, 2005—*Destructive Trends in Mental Health* is a new book edited by Rogers H. Wright and Nicolas A. Cummings. The work was [reviewed](#) for the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality by N.A.R.T.H. member [A. Dean Byrd](#).

Dr. Byrd is also director of clinical training for [LDS](#) social services at Brigham Young University. The Mormon church is staunchly opposed to recognizing homosexuality and any social or cultural, legal or economic measures that would benefit homosexuals and their families. Sheri L. Dew, CEO of [Deseret Book](#), general officer of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and second counselor in the LDS Relief Society general presidency, addressed the Republican National Convention on August 30, 2004. In an article she wrote for Meridian Magazine damning same-sex marriage and its “destruction” of the “traditional family,” Ms. Dew called for “a comparison between the atrocities of Hitler and what is happening in terms of contemporary threats [by gays] against the family.”

Dr. Byrd's book review appeared on-line [while](#) the Tennessee Department of Children's Services was conducting an [investigation](#) of the “ex-gay” *Refuge* camp run by [Love in Action, Inc.](#) The investigation was prompted by the blogging of one of the program's 16-year-old involuntary inmates, “Zach.” What goes on in the adult versions of these programs is clearly beyond reasonable medical protocols, as Mel White knows firsthand. Who's [Mel White](#)?

From the 1960s through the early 1990s, the Rev. Mel White played a behind-the-scenes role in the resurgence of evangelical Christianity. While pastoring several West Coast churches and working with national crusades like Youth for Christ, White produced films and ghostwrote books for a “who's who” of evangelical leaders, including the Revs. Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy and Pat Robertson.

Unknown to his friends and colleagues, White was also a closeted gay man who was nearly driven to suicide after two decades of struggling to save his marriage—and, he believed, his soul—with “reparative therapies” including electric shock and exorcism.

As Byrd noted, “Wright and Cummings express alarm from the ‘ever-proliferating therapies that are not only without validation but are irresponsible, and often later shown to be harmful.’” How appropriate, since Dr. Byrd is affiliated with N.A.R.T.H., an organization that *advocates* “therapies that are not only without validation but are irresponsible, and often later shown to be harmful.”

One section of Byrd's review was entitled “Gay Activism in APA.” It was followed by a section entitled “Advocacy Without Evidence of Efficacy.” The juxtaposing was as telling as the quoted excerpts.

In the “Gay Activism in APA” section, Byrd quoted Rogers H. Wright from the book's Introduction:

Gay groups within the APA have repeatedly tried to persuade the association to adopt ethical standards that prohibit therapists from offering *psychotherapeutic services*

designed to ameliorate 'gayness,' on the basis that such efforts are unsuccessful and harmful to the consumer. . . .

Such efforts are especially troubling because they abrogate *the patient's right to choose the therapist and determine the therapeutic goals*. They also deny the reality of data demonstrating that psychotherapy can be effective in changing sexual preferences in patients who have a desire to do so. [italics mine]

Shouldn't "psychotherapeutic services designed to ameliorate 'gayness'" be unethical *and* illegal, given the abundant evidence that these for-profit programs run by Christian ministries are indeed "unsuccessful and harmful to the consumer"?

According to the American Medical Association, "there is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of reparative therapy as a treatment to change one's sexual orientation." The AMA "does not recommend aversion therapy for gay men and lesbians."

The American Psychological Association has stated that "groups who try to change the sexual orientation of people through so-called conversion therapy are misguided and run the risk of causing a great deal of psychological harm to those they say they are trying to help."

The American Psychiatric Association concurs: "gay men and lesbians who have accepted their sexual orientation positively are better adjusted than those who have not done so."

And according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "therapy directed at specifically changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation."

Ex-gay therapy was publicly decried in 1999 as unethical by both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. The National Association of School Psychologists and the American Counseling Association also agree. Indeed, the American Psychiatric Association has endorsed gay marriage as a way of [promoting mental health](#).

"The patient's right to choose the therapist and determine the therapeutic goals." Patients' rights are indeed important, especially since they are already being theocratized. For example, if you're a woman and your physician or health care provider has a personal [religious objection](#) to the OB/GYN procedure you want or need, s/he can refuse treatment. And if your physician gives you a prescription for [birth control](#) or the "[morning after](#)" pill, the pharmacist can [refuse](#) to fill the prescription. The [theocratizing of health care](#) is well underway in this country.

What if a patient (aka "consumer") determined the therapeutic goal to be becoming a homosexual or increasing pre-existing "gayness"? Would Byrd and Wright still so ardently support the patient's right to set the "therapeutic goals"? Would they provide the therapy?

John Nardo, M.D., is a psychiatrist in Georgia. He is among the professionals publicly [questioning](#) the ethics and legality of forced treatment like that imposed by Love in Action and other faith-based "ex-gay" programs: "To me this is something of an unimaginable situation, reminiscent of the mid-19th century when people were committed to hospitals by families for all sorts of things. Though it is possible that there are some other factors involved, Zack [his spelling] appears to be a person who has been deprived of his constitutional rights without due process of law—because he is gay."

As Dr. Nardo noted, if Love in Action were a licensed mental health facility it would be bound by Tennessee law that gives children 16 or older the same rights as an adult with respect to mental health treatment. The American Psychiatric Association's opposition to "reparative" and similar "ex-gay" therapies is [a matter of record](#), and *Refuge* inmate Zach was 16 years old at the time of his incarceration.

Psychologist [Jeffry G. Ford](#) was once the executive director of Outpost, an “ex-gay” ministry located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. For many years he was a national speaker for Exodus International, a communications hub for “ex-gay ministries.” His firsthand accounts of the “ex-gay” sham and the damage reparative, conversion and aversion therapies do have been published in peer reviewed scientific journals. His [seminal study](#) “Healing Homosexuals: A Psychologist’s Journey Through the Ex-Gay Movement and the Pseudo-Science of Reparative Therapy” appeared in *The Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*.

[Exodus International](#) is not only a hub for “ex-gay ministries,” it provides another example of what happens to health care in a theocracy. The American covenant holds that we do not discriminate against people for what’s beyond their control, but Exodus asserts that “even if homosexuality were partially or completely genetic in origin, that does not change the moral question involved: God declares in the Bible that homosexual and lesbian activities are sin (Romans 1:26–27).” In the American theocracy Exodus advocates, religious dogma cobbled together by power-hungry fanatics takes precedence over everything else, including science, common sense, reality and their own history.

On July 28, 2004, Los Angeles Times writer Steve Lopez did a background story on Exodus:

The Florida-based group was inspired nearly 30 years ago in Anaheim by charismatic Christian leaders who declared homosexuality a sin. Just one problem. [The] two men who helped get the movement started were counseling gays to go straight when, lo and behold, they fell in love with each other. . . . The two men dumped their wives, abandoned Exodus, and wore each other’s wedding bands. . . .

Acknowledging and accepting one’s homosexuality is a major step toward mental health and living an honest life of self-respect. Repressing it would indeed be a “destructive trend in mental health,” as was so well illustrated by remarks [attributed](#) to the executive director of Love in Action that runs the *Refuge* program: “Rev. John Smid . . . *is married to a woman and claims to have left behind ‘the homosexual lifestyle,’ if not same-sex attractions*” [italics mine].

On June 27, 2005, spokesman for Tennessee’s Department of Children’s Services Rob Johnson [confirmed](#) that “DCS dispatched its special investigations unit to the facility [*Refuge*], and after conducting a full investigation, determined that the [child abuse](#) allegations were unfounded.” But the executive director of Love in Action made another comment that confirmed what independent scientific research has been saying for more than a century. (A featured story in the July 5 issue of *The Advocate* magazine provides a timeline for the “106 years of ‘Born that way.’”) Rev. John Smid’s comment also explicitly stated the dangers of such “ex-gay” programs: “We understand people don’t have control over what they feel, but we teach them they are able to control what they do,” Smid said. “We don’t have to act on those desires, even if we feel them.”

Rev. Smid would certainly seem to be admitting that homosexuality is not simply “a choice,” but an innate, genetic, “[God-given](#)” nature that “people don’t have control over.” His so-called “moral” solution: repression, denial, and living a life that’s a lie. Not exactly a prescription for mental health or happiness, is it? [Washington Blade](#) Managing Editor Kevin Neff [said it well](#): “there is no such thing as ‘ex-gay.’ There is ‘repress-my-inate-immutable-characteristics-and-deny-their-existence,’ but no such condition as ‘ex-gay.’”

It’s unethical for licensed psychiatrists and psychologists to provide dangerous therapies that promote the repression, denial, and life-lie Rev. Smid lives and wishes to impose on others.

It is indeed a destructive trend in mental health care not to pull the licenses of those practitioners who provide such “ex-gay therapies,” as well as the licenses of all health care providers whose professional decisions and responsibilities are dictated solely by their personal religious beliefs.

The APA and state licensing agencies could have begun at the “Love Won Out” [conference](#) in Bothell, Washington, where infamous N.A.R.T.H. “psychologists” such as Bill Maier and Joseph J. Nicolosi were

claiming that homosexuality can be “healed by the power of God’s love.” And if that doesn’t work, there are always electric shock treatments and exorcisms.

Once health care is fully theocratized, no doubt “ex-gay” mental health programs will feature lobotomies to “cure” homosexuality.

Copyright © 1998–2005 Online Journal™. All rights reserved.