

The Banning of Conversion Therapy in the United States

Conversion therapy is the centuries old practice of trying to change a person's sexuality or gender identity in an attempt to make them straight or cisgender. The practice has caused unspeakable harm to countless individuals over the past century and many survivors of the institutions and groups that use it have spoken out about their experiences and the abuse they endured. The topic has been a subject of serious controversy for many years, but what started this hate, discrimination, and bloodshed to begin with, and what can we do to stop it?

For Christians who believe that the bible is God's written word it is thought that God produced its contents through human authors to tell the story of his creations, how sin entered the world, and the redemption and salvation that can be found in Jesus Christ. As we know all too well today, the separation of church and state in the United States, a nation "discovered" and built on Christianity, is often a thin and blurry line but in the late 1800s and early 1900s that line was more blurred than anything we experience in modern politics today. This thin line led to what could be called one of the most harmful mistranslations in the history of religion. The concept of homosexuality didn't appear in the bible until 1946 in Leviticus 18:22 which states "thou shalt not lie with a man as with a woman, for it is an abomination". It has been deduced through academic studies of the bible that the quote actually refers to pedophilia, as the noun used for "man" is not the noun typically used in the original Hebrew bible to refer to a man, but instead used to refer to young boys. This mistranslation has not only opened the doors of abuse and bloodshed suffered by the LGBT+ community but has also shielded the Catholic Church from the accountability it must take for the countless incidents of sexual assault of young boys by the

religious leaders within it. All together there are seven biblical texts typically used to justify homophobia, Noah and Ham (Genesis 9:20-27), Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-11), Levitical Laws (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13), Second Testament vice lists (1 Corinthians 6:9-10), and Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 1:26-27). Each of these texts have been subject to debate for many years and each of them have since been debunked by religious scholars who have concluded that what most of these passages actually refer to is rape and pedophilia.

This topic relates heavily to a subject we discussed in class recently of how religion has contributed to domestic and international violence in the past as well as contemporarily. In the readings we were given by Hitchens, Cortright, and Cavanaugh it was discussed that religion seeks to explain itself and debunk its "competitors". To put it simply, religion aligns significantly with human nature as it is man's attempt to explain the things about the world that don't make sense. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is well known among many religious and non-religious communities alike, what is not typically known however, is that around 1650 BCE (the bible is believed to be written between about 1200 and 165 BCE) the city of Tall el-Hammam was wiped out by a meteor that heated up in the atmosphere and broke into pieces of molten rock that proceeded to rain down onto the Earth. Many religious scholars believe that this occurrence is where the story of Sodom and Gomorrah originated as it fits the location and timeline of the creation of the bible. When considering human nature and the intrinsic desire to make sense of the world around us it is understandable that in the time the bible was written, when humanity had no real knowledge of what existed beyond the Earth, people assumed that the complete annihilation of the largest of the three major cities that existed during that time was the result of an act that angered the "omnipotent creator". If you take this intrinsic desire to explain the unexplainable into account when thinking about religion, even the existence of

Heaven and Hell make a lot of sense because when a loved one is lost the desire to have a beautiful, peaceful place in which they still exist and you will see them again is understandable. The same goes for the oppression of the LGBT+ community, when cisgender heterosexual (cishet) Christians observed the existence of gay individuals and gay culture, it didn't make sense to them. As a result, it was decided that LGBT+ individuals were the result of some kind of mistake or punishment and they were labeled as unnatural and abominable. In one of the readings in the subject of religion and (non)violence, Hitchens states, "[Religion] is, after all, wholly man-made, and does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths", in many ways LGBT+ culture can be seen as a faith of its own. Though there are countless LGBT+ individuals who still identify with the different religions of the world, many cishet Christians view the existence of LGBT+ individuals and LGBT+ culture as an opposing faith that spits on the laws of Christianity, so then came about the idea of "the cure".

In 1899 a man named Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862-1929) kick started the practice of conversion therapy by claiming at a conference that he had turned a gay man straight through 45 sessions of hypnosis and a few trips to a brothel. Thus began the concept of a "cure" for homosexuality and "sexual deviance". After his death his former colleague in sexology and hypnotism, Albert Moll, published a treatise on the psychology of parapsychologists who believe in supernatural phenomena, such as telekinesis, telepathy, and clairvoyance, stating that they "suffered from a morbid will to believe", with Schrenck-Notzing as the personality prototype. The treatise discussed the fact that while Schrenck-Notzing had a brilliant mind that greatly influenced the field of psychology and hypnotherapy in Germany, he also believed in the supernatural and was willing to make outrageous and unfounded claims with little to no scientific

evidence, leading to much of his work being debunked after his death. However, despite his reputation crumbling, his claims of the possibility of conversion therapy as a functional and ethical practice were left widely unquestioned for several decades.

While the fight against homophobia and conversion therapy started several decades prior, “homosexuality” wasn’t removed from the second edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-II) by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973, officially declaring, on a medical and psychological level, that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. Even then however, it was replaced with a new diagnosis, “sexual orientation disturbance” in the DSM-III, thus making it easy to find justification in the practice of conversion therapy. Institutions and organizations quickly began to pop up worldwide and it soon became normalized to force queer people, especially minors and young adults, into conversion therapy against their will. The atrocities committed at these institutions permanently damaged countless queer individuals and left a trail of dead in their wake. In the early to mid 1900s it was very common for said institutions to use egregious methods such as electroshock therapy, hired sex workers, and forced exposure to heterosexual pornography with some going as far as implanting electrodes directly into an individual’s brain for more intensive electroshock therapy and performing lobotomies. One survivor stated, “The therapist ordered me [to be] bound to a table to have ice, heat and electricity applied to my body. I was forced to watch clips on a television of gay men holding hands, hugging and having sex. I was supposed to associate those images with the pain I was feeling to once and for all turn into a straight boy.” Some people were forcefully administered chemicals that made them vomit while looking at their same-sex partners, others were given electrical shocks to either their brain or genitals while they cross dressed or looked at gay pornography. This treatment led to fractures in the minds of numerous

survivors who have since spoken out about their experiences, many stating they don't believe they'll ever fully recover from the trauma they endured and many others being lost to suicide or drug addiction after their release.

When discussing conversion therapy the connections between the practice and the Catholic Church as well as the Troubled Teen Industry are impossible to ignore. The TTI is a multibillion dollar industry that spreads across the globe with the claimed purpose of helping and healing children and young adults with psychological and behavioral disorders, what is hidden under the surface however, is often a prison like environment with many harboring high levels of abuse. Speaking to the claim that now that many of the physically violating and abusive methods have been slowly phased out of many conversion therapy programs it is no longer an unethical practice, an op-ed published by John J. Lapin of Georgetown Law accurately states, "even with less barbaric techniques, the risk of serious psychological trauma to those who attempt to change their sexual orientation, and especially to minors, who are often forced into treatment, is profound". A study done in 2019 by UCLA's School of Law the William's Institute found that an estimated 698,000 adults in the US have been victimized by the practice of conversion therapy at some point in their lives with around 300,000 receiving it as adolescents. Even today in 2023 there are several known camps and institutions that practice conversion therapy, many of them either existing inside of or in close partnership with the troubled teen industry and the same study states that around 16,000 LGBT+ youth will be subjected to conversion therapy in the states that have yet to ban the practice before they reach the age of 18.

While these institutions still exist, the pressure being put upon them has increased exponentially and the rise of social media has allowed more survivors to share their stories, leading to the closure of several boarding schools, camps, and other programs that practiced

forced conversion therapy through legal proceedings as well as loss of finances. The fight for progress has had its ups and downs since it began and in the 1960s and 1970s, as the gay rights movement took to the streets and demanded change, the field of psychology slowly began to condemn the practice of conversion therapy. However, the war on queer and trans people was only intensified by the AIDS epidemic that began in June of 1981 which led to fear and hysteria nationwide, further tormenting and alienating queer individuals. Following the outbreak, several more well known conversion therapy institutions were opened between 1982 and 2003 accompanied by a new method of abuse and brainwashing with one survivor stating, “I was told that my faith community rejected my sexuality; that I was the abomination we had heard about in Sunday school; that I was the only gay person in the world; that it was inevitable I would get H.I.V. and AIDS.”

Today several well known and respected organizations have condemned the use of conversion therapy including the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Physicians, American Medical Association, American Counseling Association, American Psychological Association, and many more. In 2012 California made history by becoming the first state to put forth a complete ban on the use of conversion therapy against minors, forcing numerous institutions and groups to slowly but surely permanently close their doors. In June of the following year a well known Christian group based in California that used the practice, Exodus International, apologized for the harm it had caused and the foundation was dissolved after 38 years. Also in 2012 a survivor sued the New Jersey based institution they were held in and won, resulting in the dissolution of the institution as a whole and stated, “Gay conversion therapy stole years from my life, and nearly stole my life, my hope is that others can be spared the unneeded harm that comes from the lies

the defendants and those like them spread.” One year later former governor Chris Christie signed a complete ban on the use of conversion therapy on minors into law making New Jersey the second state to put forth an all-out ban.

Once California and New Jersey had put forth bans the fight for justice intensified and the voice of the gay rights movement began to be heard nationwide with the 2015 Supreme Court decision in the Obergefell vs. Hodges case, legalizing gay marriage on a federal level. Following this major historic decision and the very recent landmark legislation the Respect for Marriage Act that just passed the house and senate guaranteeing the rights of gay marriage, the fight against conversion therapy has begun to grow in strength and in numbers and the tide has started to turn. Just before the legalization of gay marriage, which took place on June 26th of 2015, Oregon followed in the footsteps of California and New Jersey when the Oregon House of Representatives voted in favor of HB 2307, banning the use of conversion therapy on minors on May 18th 2015. The states that have since put forth all out bans of their own since are Illinois (August 20, 2015), Vermont (May 25, 2016), New Mexico (April 7, 2017), Connecticut (May 10, 2017), Rhode Island (July 19, 2017), Nevada (May 17, 2017), Washington (March 28, 2018), Hawaii (May 25, 2018), Maryland (May 15, 2018), New Hampshire (June 8, 2018), Delaware (July 23, 2018), New York (January 25, 2019), Massachusetts (April 8, 2019), Maine (May 29, 2019), Colorado (May 31, 2019), Utah (January 21, 2020), Virginia (March 2, 2020), Minnesota (July 15, 2021), and Pennsylvania (August 16, 2022) with North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Michigan putting bans specifically on the use of state and federal funding for conversion therapy. During this time 109 municipalities also put forth bans of their own with Cincinnati, Ohio being the first in 2015 and Akron, Ohio being the most recent bringing the list up to 110 on October 24 of this year. With dozens of these votes being unanimous decisions and the frequency of new

bans rising to the surface increasing, the force of progress is increasing along with them. Several activist groups today are still fighting to end conversion therapy and give justice to the individuals it has victimized. The process can be slow, but progress is never easy and as we've seen in recent years the movement has gained significant traction and validity and awareness has been raised.

In conclusion, the LGBT+ community has been fighting for rights, justice, and respect for close to a century and the fight to end the trauma and heartbreak caused by conversion therapy is an ongoing battle. Others may have written their papers on the resolution of international conflicts and conflicts that ended years ago, but while the fight to end conversion therapy isn't over we've taken some tremendous steps forward and if we only talk about the wars that have already been won we can't contribute to the battles still in progress. This subject is important to me because I have seen the harm done by some of the institutions and groups that use the practice firsthand, and it is never pretty. I feel that as human beings we need to always continue looking inward, examining the parts of ourselves that we don't want to look at, observing our own biases and learning from them. Without this analysis and observation we can't be a part of the momentous change taking place around us and we wouldn't be giving ourselves the opportunity to be a part of the new world that is being built.

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