

SpongeBob SquarePants and the Emasculating Arm of Flesh

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In late January of 2005, an unusual story about the religious right, homosexuality, and a cartoon sponge swept through the media, from the BBC to “Saturday Night Live.” The story concerned a speech given by James Dobson, founder of the conservative Christian organization Focus on the Family (FOF), to a group of members of Congress at an inaugural banquet. Dobson reportedly accused SpongeBob SquarePants of uniting with a number of cartoon figures — including the Muppets, Dora the Explorer, and Bob the Builder — in a morally reprehensible gay conspiracy.

SpongeBob was to appear in a children’s video promoted by the We Are Family Foundation (WAFF). WAFF’s website states that it “began in response to the tragic events of September 11th” and seeks “to promote diversity, understanding, respect and the vision of a global family” (We Are Family Foundation). The video it produced, which would appear in 61,000 elementary schools across the nation, featured an array of cartoon characters singing and dancing to the 1970s hit “We Are Family.” But Dobson would not be fooled by this thinly veiled and “sinister” gay plot. He saw right through “the theme of ‘tolerance and diversity,’ which are almost always buzzwords for homosexual advocacy” (Dobson, Feb. 2005). His spokesperson called it “a classic bait and switch,” and accused WAFF of attempting to manipulate and brainwash children. And yet the video did not contain a single explicit reference to sexuality, though the accompanying teacher’s guide “makes three passing references to same-sex parents” within the context of “generic advice about what teachers should do

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if kids ask them about atypical homes” (Olbermann). Yet despite the apparent lack of explicitly sexual content, Dobson remained steadfast in his position, insisting the WAFF website contained “overtly prohomosexual content” prior to the unprecedented degree of public attention (Dobson, Feb. 2005). Not surprisingly, Dobson’s seemingly outrageous allegations opened the door for a wave of ridicule. But it seems that the larger issues behind this story drowned amidst the (admittedly humorous) references to Dobson’s sanity and serious speculations about a sponge’s sexuality.

In a monthly newsletter to FOF’s members, Dobson insisted he “intended to express concern not about SpongeBob...but about the way in which those childhood symbols are apparently being hijacked to promote an agenda that involves teaching homosexual propaganda to children” (Dobson, Feb. 2005). Whether or not SpongeBob has a crush on his starfish pal — the BBC claimed that SpongeBob “is seen as an icon for adult gay men in the U.S., apparently because he regularly holds hand with his [starfish] sidekick Patrick” (BBC News) — evades the real issue for Dobson. It seems poor SpongeBob was merely a victim of the perpetrators of the gay plot, who recruited him to infiltrate the minds of young children. One can easily dismiss Dobson’s accusation as paranoid, intolerant, or homophobic. But this conspiracy theory would not sound so outlandish to his Christian fundamentalist audience. The fundamentalist opposition to homosexuality may hardly seem newsworthy. Less familiar, however, is the rhetoric of the “homosexual campaign against children” which figures quite prominently within this religious, political, and ideological context. The firm opposition to (male) homosexuality and the conspiracy that accompanies it are grounded in the fundamentalist constructions of gender and sexuality. Identifying these constructions will reveal the perceived threat male homosexuality poses to children. Armed with this understanding of gender and sexuality, fundamentalists employ the language of holy war to defend patriarchy from the symbolic emasculation precipitated by male homosexuality.

The Birth of Gay Identity and the Fundamentalist Response

Although homosexuality has remained a persistent feature of human behavior, the phenomenon of the homosexual person per se

did not appear on the scene until relatively recently. Prior to the 19th century, homosexual behavior fell under the rubric of “sodomy,” a category including nearly any sexual activity divorced from the task of procreation. “Sodomites” indulged in sinful aberrations, but their behavior did not define them or even constitute an essential part of their identity. Not until 1869, when a Hungarian doctor coined the term “homosexuality,” was the homosexual as person born (Badinter, 98-101). At first, “homosexual” remained relatively synonymous with “invert,” referring to masculine females but especially to effeminate males. After the 1950s, the sexual object began to identify an individual’s sexual identity. The line between “fairies” and “men” shifted to demarcate “homosexual” and “heterosexual.” The creation of this new type of person in turn produced a new collective subject, a kind of ethnicized sexuality, making collective action possible for the first time. Gay communities grew in urban areas, which then gave birth to political movements (Smith and Windes, 10-13).

Before the dawn of gay identity, both individual and collective, conservative Christians had made a point to condemn homosexual behavior. Yet they regarded this sexual transgression as but one of the many forms of sodomy. Homosexuality did not rank high on the fundamentalist list of concerns prior to the gay movement. Nor did most issues involving the larger public sphere, with the exceptions of communism and evolution. Before the 1970s, fundamentalists focused largely on establishing a network of churches and institutions to strengthen their communities. But the dramatic changes of the 1960s beckoned them to enter the public sphere (Ammerman, 39).

In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court prohibited organized prayer in public schools. Following this blow to religion’s role in the public sphere came a whole host of developments that fundamentalists found threatening. The proposed Equal Rights Amendment threatened the traditional Christian model of the submissive wife. Legislation began to prohibit physical punishment of children, hindering the father’s role as a disciplinarian. Gays adopted the language of civil rights (Ammerman, 41-42). “And finally, *Roe v. Wade*. All the forces seeking to destroy traditional families and moral society seemed to converge in a court ruling that abortion was a matter of private choice” (Ammerman, 42). This 1973 court decision has become for

fundamentalists what Sudhir Kakar refers to as a “chosen trauma.” A chosen trauma causes a community to feel helpless and victimized. The trauma is not chosen in the sense that the community calls it upon itself. Rather, its members choose to repeatedly pour salt on the wound in order to create a sense of solidarity. Invoking a mythologized victimization unites a community, mobilizing its members to persevere in the face of (perceived) persecution (Kakar, 50). Susan Harding noted that members of Jerry Falwell’s empire would demonstrate the strength of their pro-life convictions by recalling “where they were and what they were doing the day the *Roe v. Wade* decision came down”(Harding, 195). In the 22 years it has been in effect (and then upheld), *Roe v. Wade* has served as an open-ended chosen trauma, symbolizing the perceived victimization of Christians at the hands of a much greater social and political force.

When the U.S. finally pulled out of Vietnam, fundamentalists feared it would jeopardize the strength and power of their country. America’s economy and military served as the vehicle for evangelism. Fundamentalists considered America a chosen nation, bearing the responsibility of delivering the gospel to the rest of the world. If America lost its might, it could not succeed in this divine task (Ammerman, 41-42). But the 1976 election of Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist, initially boosted their confidence and inspired more involvement in the political arena. A group of pastors gathered to organize the Moral Majority in 1979. This political organization, led by Falwell, had a well-established network of churches as an organizational foundation, and the financial resources generated by a televangelist network. At the heart of its activism was a profound concern for the “traditional family.” This concern motivates every major issue that has engaged the Christian right: abortion, pornography, the Equal Rights Amendment, laws against spousal and child abuse, and, of course, gay rights (Ammerman, 43-45).

These issues found an especially receptive audience in the South, which underwent more dramatic changes than the rest of the nation during this period, confronted with the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration nearly a century after its northern neighbors. Three-fourths of the population lived in rural areas in the 1940s, but by 1960 more than half lived in urban areas. By 1980,

10% of the population was not native to the South. Along with the effects of modernity came the civil rights movement, hardly well received by most Southerners (Ammerman, 39-40). These factors virtually created an alien environment to those who had grown up in small traditional communities, making the South particularly “ripe for a fundamentalist movement” (Ammerman, 40).

The increasing visibility of a gay community, along with the newly acquired political bearings of the fundamentalists, combined to create a whole new playing field for public issues about homosexuality. The very concept of homosexuality gets tossed back and forth between essentialist and constructionist definitions across this field (Smith and Windes, 141-149). In this new political context, the tragic sodomite was transformed into the greatest expression of sinfulness in the eyes of fundamentalists.

The Appeal to Divine Authority

Fundamentalists point to a select few biblical passages to support their claim that homosexuality is sinful. It is, perhaps, a commonly held assumption that the Bible condemns homosexuality. This influences the translation and reading of passages often cited as prohibitions against same-sex sex. Yet a closer inspection of the text reveals greater ambiguity than fundamentalists would permit. Focus on the Family’s web resources introduces the six oft-cited passages — Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:24-28, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Timothy 1:8-11, 2 Peter 2:6-10, and Jude 1:7 — with an appeal to divine authority: “God, the Author of truth, has a few things to say about homosexual behavior” (Harrub 2003). This serves to establish the boundaries of discussion at the outset, informing the reader that their claims have sacred status, and are thus impervious to legitimate alternatives. Calling upon the sacred authority of the text places fundamentalists’ truth claims out of the reach of human opponents, while concealing their own agency and interests (Lincoln, 6).

Focus on the Family’s website first cites 1 Corinthians 6:9-11:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual

offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor
slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

This choice of translation, the New International Version, renders the Greek terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* as “male prostitutes” and “homosexual offenders.” *Malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* literally mean “soft males” and “males who lie with males” (Elliot, 32). Translating the Greek terms as FOF does not only fails to identify what these terms meant to the people who actually used them, but also replaces them with concepts that did not appear until nearly two thousand years later. As John Elliot demonstrates in his lengthy discussion of this passage, these terms must be placed in their native contexts. The concepts of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality “are absent from the world of the Bible and alien to its thought, which knows nothing of ‘sexual identity’ or ‘sexual orientation’” (Elliot, 32).

Perhaps the most commonly invoked passage, Leviticus 18:22, forbids male-male sex among a list of other sexual offenses. Jacob Milgrom argues that the “common denominator of the entire list...is procreation within a stable family” (Milgrom, 1568). The list therefore forbids acts thought to inhibit procreation, which explains the absence of a prohibition against female-female sex. Milgrom further concludes that the verse in question does not forbid the sexual act itself; it only forbids a male from having sex with a male in his own family clan (Milgrom, 1568-1569).

In addition to the six oft-cited passages invoked to prohibit homosexuality, fundamentalists point to Genesis, insisting that God created two sexes for a divine reason. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Dobson uses this verse to support a rigidly polar model of gender: “That is the divine plan. It leaves no doubt that the Creator made not one sex but two, each beautifully crafted to ‘fit with’ and meet the needs of the other” (Dobson 2001, 17). A Christian pastor, quoted in the *New York Times* on his opposition to gay marriage, explains, “The Hebrew words for male and female are actually the words for the male and female genital parts...The male is the piercer; the female is the pierced. That is the way God designed it” (Shorto). As Dobson sees it, the two sexes “view life from opposite

ends of the universe” (Dobson 2001, 13). He describes at length the different attributes belonging to these opposing sectors of the universe. Women “are inclined toward predictability, stability, security, caution and steadiness...The female temperament lends itself to nurturance, caring, sensitivity, tenderness and compassion” (Dobson 2001, 27). Men, however, “value change, opportunity, risk, speculation and adventure...Men are also ordained in Scripture for leadership in their homes” (Dobson 2001, 27). Dobson nostalgically recalls the day before “our culture [began] diminishing the natural, innate differences between the sexes” (Dobson, Nov. 2004). He notes that even children “can see that boys and girls are different,” a fact once so painfully obvious it would have been considered a truism (Dobson 2001, 13).

In case Scripture and good old common sense are no longer enough, though, Dobson further supports his understanding of gender by appealing to biology. He delves into a discussion of hormones, serotonin and the amygdala to demonstrate the depth of the chasm that exists between the sexes. His discussion primarily focuses on testosterone and its effects on male behavior: “Most experts believe boys’ tendency to take risks, to be more assertive, to fight and compete, to argue, to boast, and to excel at certain skills such as problem solving, math, and science, is directly linked to the way the brain is hardwired and to the presence of testosterone ...Testosterone also accounts for boys’ early desire to be the strongest, bravest, toughest, rootin-shootin hombre on the range” (Dobson 2001, 25). For Dobson, masculinity is essentially the work of testosterone, and femininity is the lack of it. Gender is nature, not nurture: “Is this biological ‘predetermination’ still operative in sophisticated, modern nations today? The evidence indicates that it is” (Dobson 2001, 23). With this rigid construction of gender in place, Dobson can then claim that same-sex partners simply cannot fit one another, in both a biological and religious sense. In this conservative world, divided neatly into pink and blue, boys should be boys, girls should be girls, and everyone should be heterosexual.

Masculinity as Achievement: Gender Development and Its Perils

Despite this unswerving insistence on the immutability and innateness of gender differences, the fundamentalists also insist that

masculinity (not femininity, it seems) must be earned. A child must follow a prescribed path of gender development to attain the masculinity that supposedly already constitutes an essential part of his identity. Dobson extensively cites the work of a quasi-Freudian “psychologist,” Joseph Nicolosi, to instruct parents on how to lead their child down this straight and narrow path. Nicolosi explains, “In infancy, both boys and girls are emotionally attached to the mother...Girls can continue to develop in their feminine identification through the relationship with their mothers. On the other hand, a boy has an additional developmental task — to disidentify from his mother and identify with his father” (Nicolosi, 23). The boy must decide by age three, writes Dobson, “that he would like to grow up like his father. This is a choice. Implicit in that choice is the decision that he would not like to grow up to be like his mother” (Dobson, June 2002). Since mom and dad theoretically live on opposite sides of the gender spectrum, the boy has to make the right decision. Quoting another like-minded psychologist, Robert Stoller, Nicolosi states, “The first order of being a man...is don’t be a woman” (Nicolosi, 24). And thus the boy must reject his mother and femininity to pursue his (innate?) masculinity.

Nicolosi insists that masculinity is an achievement, and indeed that it has its rewards. If all goes well on the quest for manhood, boys “will find a sense of freedom — of power — by being different from their mothers, outgrowing them as they move into a man’s world” (Dobson, June 2002). The boy who successfully steps out of the feminine world finds himself in the ordered realm of the public sphere, where men make the rules and call the shots. It is here that he finds freedom (from the feminine) and power (over the feminine). Woman is the necessary object of the male’s achieved masculinity — possessing a woman demonstrates that one is not a woman. The male who fails to break loose from and demonstrate power over woman is essentially not a man at all. This makes heterosexuality and masculinity virtually synonymous. The gay male remains bound to femininity. Yet though he stands as a symbol of effeminacy, he also symbolically threatens to emasculate. The gay male is at once the pierced and the piercer, both passive and active. He takes on the active role without rightfully “earning” it. Fundamentalists thus portray homosexuality as the failure

to identify with and achieve the appropriate gender, and also as a threat to others trying to achieve it.

On this view, homosexuality is not fundamentally about sexuality at all. Rather it is a failure of (male) gender differentiation in early childhood, before the development of sexual feelings. Nicolosi, along with a handful of other so-called psychologists, refers to homosexuality as Gender Identity Disorder (GID). Construing homosexuality as such allows him to claim that one can indeed prevent and treat this psychological “disorder.” Nicolosi in fact specializes in preventing homosexuality in young boys (ideally by age *three*) and “converting” gay males to the straight life. He calls this “reparative therapy,” a practice explicitly rejected by the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychoanalytic Association — each of which holds that homosexuality does not constitute a disorder in the first place and thus does not require treatment. But working from the assumption that homosexuality is in need of a cure, reparative therapists define “success” by the repression of homosexual behavior, and have even used methods frighteningly reminiscent of *A Clockwork Orange* (Herek). But even with the high (religious) motivation to report success, studies suggest that only 27% of clients make the switch, and only 18% of this group were exclusively homosexual in the first place (Manier).

But for reparative therapists, these statistics only prove they need to nip homosexuality in the bud whenever possible. Nicolosi’s *A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, which Dobson highly recommends to his devotees, teaches parents how to identify the red flags of “prehomosexuality.” He sums up the indicators of this condition in a word: “nonmasculinity.” Parents of unathletic, passive, unaggressive, artistically inclined boys should beware, he claims. Most of his adult clients “did display a characteristic gender nonconformity that had set them painfully apart from other boys...[but] their parents had not suspected anything amiss” (Nicolosi, 21). In addition to immediately placing the 3 year old “prehomosexual” in therapy, parents must ensure the child has a decidedly masculine father to affirm the boy’s masculinity. Nicolosi urges fathers to engage in rough-and-tumble play with their boys, to take them in the shower so they will notice their similar anatomy, and so on. Dobson echoes this sentiment,

insisting he believes “that the high incidence of homosexuality occurring in Western nations is related, at least in part, to the absence of positive male influences when boys are moving through the first crisis of childhood development” (Dobson 2001, 58).

But other factors can easily lead boys astray from the straight path as well. In fact, the culture’s current state of depravity makes it an arduous journey indeed. Between boys and their masculinity also stands the threat of sexual abuse and indoctrination by the “homosexual activists.” But it remains unclear where (or if) the line exists between “pedophiles” and “homosexuals.” Dobson certainly tries to blur this line in the mind of his readers when he addresses the perceived threats to young boys in a chapter titled “The Origins of Homosexuality.” After a long excerpt from Nicolosi, Dobson claims, “There is another major cause of gender identity disorder. It results from early sexual abuse” (Dobson 2001, 124). He then quickly warns parents that “there is a vigorous effort now to end the taboo against sex between men and boys” (Dobson 2001, 24). In evidence of this, he first refers to the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), a group that “consists of little more than a private mailbox service in San Francisco” (Wikipedia) and is openly condemned by most gay and lesbian organizations. Fundamentalists often use NAMBLA to make a connection between pedophilia and homosexuality, though “empirical research does *not* show that gay or bisexual men are any more likely than heterosexual men to molest children” (Herek). Dobson goes on to claim that there is a “vigorous effort by gays to infiltrate the Boy Scouts in the same way lesbians have done so successfully in the Girl Scouts, where 33 percent of their staff is said to be lesbian” (Dobson 2001, 124). Gays have indeed protested the Boy Scouts’ policy that prohibits professed gays from serving as troop leaders, but Dobson clearly implies they have an ulterior motive. He then dives into a frantic warning to parents of young boys: “Guard them night and day when they are young. Don’t send them into a public bathroom alone. Be very careful whom you trust in summer camp, in Sunday school, or in the neighborhood” (Dobson 2001, 127). He throws in a few cautious recognitions that not *all* gays are sexual abusers, but his panic-inducing tone quickly drowns out these sober statements. Even if parents can manage to

keep their little ones safe from the homosexuals, that is, the child molesters, threats loom in every dark corner of this pro-gay culture. Television shows shamelessly flaunt gay characters, public schools teach children nonsensical words like *heterosexism* and *homophobia*, the fashion industry promotes unisex clothing. The “homosexual activist movement” has penetrated every aspect of American culture, Dobson warns. “Moms and dads, are you listening? This movement is *the* greatest threat to your children. It is of particular danger to your wide-eyed boys who have no idea what demoralization is planned for them” (Dobson 2001, 127).

Dobson’s concern for the emasculation of boys clearly exceeds his concern for the “mascultation” of girls. According to his understanding of gender, femininity need not be achieved. FOF’s webpage titled “Helping Boys Become Men and Girls Become Women,” which goes on to address only the first half of its own title, puts the difference this way: “Boys don’t automatically grow up to be men. Girls don’t always want to be women” (Focus on the Family). A child begins his or her development in the feminine world of the mother. The boy must “outgrow” this world; the girl must learn to accept that she must remain there. Helping boys in their task currently seems to take priority over keeping girls in their place. For the more boys are led astray — whether by absent fathers, (homo)sexual abusers, or the gay-friendly culture — the weaker, more feminine and impotent the world itself becomes. “Indeed, we as parents are raising the next generation of men who will either lead with honor and integrity or abandon every good thing they have inherited. They are the bridges to the future. Nations that are populated largely by immature, immoral, weak-willed, cowardly and self indulgent men cannot and will not long endure” (Dobson, Nov. 2004). Each boy who falls prey to the homosexual lifestyle ultimately contributes to the feminization of America. The threat of emasculation reaches beyond a concern for the individual children themselves, and beyond the specific problem of homosexual behavior. For fundamentalism, it suggests a far more general social crisis.

The Battle for the Family

In his volume on religious violence, Mark Juergensmeyer asserts

that “no greater humiliation can be experienced than failure over what one perceives to be one’s sexual role” (Juergensmeyer, 198). Fundamentalists regard the maintenance of public order as the role of men. Masculinity supposedly affords them the right to govern the public sphere. In a world where homosexuals (i.e. false men) and women can enter the public sphere — influencing the media, public education, legislation — male heterosexuality no longer guarantees men the freedom and power it once did. The heterosexual male (ideally) no longer has unquestioned privileged access to public positions of authority and influence; he must compete with women and effeminate men. Thus for him the public world has gone terribly awry (Juergensmeyer, 201-204).

Male homosexuality provides the most powerful and graphic symbol for endangering public order. Following Judith Butler, we can say that the body stands as a symbol for any regulated, enclosed system. Any unregulated penetration of the body of public order constitutes not only a major transgression, but the introduction of chaos itself (Butler, 168). The fundamentalists feel that homosexuality has penetrated American culture and spread throughout it like a disease. It is of no coincidence that they often portray gays as disease-ridden icons of sexual promiscuity, citing outrageous statistics that claim most gay males have hundreds of sexual partners, countless STDs, and so on. FOF estimates that “30 percent of all 20 year-old homosexual men will be HIV positive or dead by the age of 30” (Harrub 2003). Not only does homosexuality spread disease, they say, but it actually functions as a disease. The *New York Times* article on gay marriage reports on this sentiment, “Explaining how homosexuality resembles an insidious disease, Racer said, ‘If you have a same-gendered union, you have no natural, biological way to propagate your philosophy.’ So, he explained, it seeks to spread itself by other means, including popular culture” (Shorto). Homosexuality has thus penetrated, emasculated and infected a once healthy American society. Dobson warns that “there have been societies through the ages, such as Sodom and Gomorrah and the ancient Greek and Roman empires, where homosexuality reached epidemic proportions. The historical record tells us that those cultures and many others gradually descended into depravity, as the apostle Paul described in Romans 1, resulting in sexual

perversion in all its varieties” (Dobson 2001, 116-117). Therefore, if fundamentalists do not strive to fight off the disease of homosexuality, it will continue to spread until society descends into utter chaos.

Fundamentalists consider the family the most basic unit of social order. They have elevated the nuclear family to a sacred plane, where it stands as a powerful symbol for traditional order and values. Yet the fundamentalist sense of “family” does not directly correspond to the everyday use of the word. Nor does it directly correspond to any historical reality. In fundamentalist rhetoric, the family refers to an institution, supposedly five millennia old, in which the father serves as the authoritative leader and his wife faithfully and selflessly serves him and their children. The family creates an antagonism-free space, a safe haven from the impious forces of the harsh world. The historical roots of this mythic rendition of the family, however, barely extend to the 17th century (Hardacre, 131).

Prior to this time period, a family constituted an economic unit, established through arranged marriages. In this space, privacy was unheard of. Parents did not recognize childhood as a definitive period in which children required special care and affection. Children spent their time helping the family survive, not watching *Sponge Bob*. In the 17th century, upper-class families increasingly began to make the home a place of privacy and to show greater interest in their children’s development. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this trend filtered into the Euro-American bourgeoisie. The family became characterized as a place of sentimentality, a space free from the forces of industrialization. After World War II these themes of sentimentality and privacy dramatically intensified, leaving us with the idealized family that figures so prominently in fundamentalist rhetoric. By consecrating this particular familial pattern, fundamentalists have torn it from the binds of historical time (Hardacre, 131-133). Dobson claims that “[t]ampering with His plan for the family is immoral and wrong. To violate the Lord’s expressed will for humankind, especially in regard to the behaviors he has prohibited, is to court disaster” (Dobson, April 2004). Any variation in family structure, whether contemporary or historical, merely reveal the uncivilized (and thus doomed) nature of the deviant society.

Patriarchy provides the only solid link between the historical family

and the mythic fundamentalist family. But the late 20th century dealt a number of blows to the idealized patriarchal unit. As Dobson puts it, "...in the late 1960s and early 1970s, no-fault divorce laws, radical feminism and a sweeping sexual revolution combined here in the United States to rip open the fabric of the family. They left it shaken and wounded" (Dobson, Sept. 2003). The family, therefore, now stands as a shrine to male authority, erected and consecrated in effort to defend the legitimacy of patriarchy. The family is the most basic context in which a man can demonstrate his achieved masculinity and a boy learns to do the same. The homosexual activist movement, the deadliest contemporary threat to the traditional family, "has sought to implement a master plan that has had at its centerpiece the destruction of the family" (Dobson, April 2004).

But the gays are not alone on their quest to "destroy the family"; they have allied with the feminists and the liberal secularists in effort to legalize gay marriage. Together, they seem unstoppable. The gays have targeted the younger generation to "recruit them to their movement, if not to their lifestyle" (Dobson, Nov. 2004). The feminists have not only overturned the ideal of wifely submission; they have also launched a ruthless "attack on the very essence of masculinity. Everything that had been associated with maleness was subject to scorn" (Dobson, Nov. 2004). And "the liberal establishment in this country knows it can accomplish all of its hairbrained schemes, not by winning popular elections, but by enticing these few unelected judges in black robes to do their dirty work" (Dobson, Sept. 2003). Their perceived attack on the sacred mythical family constitutes grounds for holy war. Dobson sketches out the grim consequences of their concerted attack on the last vestige of true masculinity in a grand apocalyptic narrative.

He opens with a sense of urgency, insisting that "the legalization of homosexual marriage is for gay activists merely a stepping stone on the road to eliminating all social restrictions on marriage and sexuality...unless we act quickly, the family as it has been known for 5,000 years will be gone. With its demise will come chaos such as the world has never seen before" (Dobson, Sept. 2003). With the introduction, or penetration, of gay marriage comes the following: Children will receive the first blow, for "almost every child will have

several ‘moms’ and ‘dads’...huge numbers of them will be raised in foster homes or living on the street” (Dobson, April 2004). Next, every kind of conceivable sexual immorality will follow. Polygamy, group marriage, and why not “marriage between a man and his donkey? Anything allegedly linked to ‘civil rights’ will be doable” (Dobson, April 2004). Public schools will have to teach children this immorality, courts will not be able to favor heterosexual couples in matters of adoption, and Social Security will crumble. The whole world will feel the effects, for America “continues to be the fountainhead of filth and immorality, and its influence is global” (Dobson, April 2004). But most importantly, “the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ will be severely curtailed” (Dobson, April 2004). Dobson then admonishes his followers to fight back. “This is the climactic moment in the battle to preserve the family” (Dobson, April 2004). It “is our D-Day, or Gettysburg or Stalingrad. This is the big one” (Dobson, Sept. 2003). He sends his troops out into the world, armed with prayers and arguments “applicable both to people of faith and to those who espouse no faith at all.” Their victory “will require nothing short of divine intervention and guidance” (Dobson, Sept. 2003).

He ends his narrative on a small note of hope, turning to biblical models for a grand finale:

I will leave you with this familiar story told in 2 Chronicles 32. There we read about King Hezekiah who had served God ‘wholeheartedly’ during his reign. However, he eventually faced a terrible crisis when Sennacherib, King of Assyria, invaded Judah with 185,000 well-armed and trained warriors. They wiped out the defenders of every city that lay in their path. Then they laid siege to Jerusalem and demanded that Hezekiah surrender or be totally destroyed...Hezekiah along with the prophet Isaiah did what you and I would have done under those distressing circumstances. They cried out to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for deliverance. Hezekiah also encouraged his countrymen with these inspired words: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged...for there is a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help

us and to fight our battle” (Dobson, April 2004).

Dobson then brings it to a close with a prayer:

Heavenly Father, our great and magnificent King, we ask You to intercede on behalf of the institution of marriage and plead with You to save the family from those who would destroy it. With them is only ‘an arm of flesh’; but our appeal is to the God of the universe who has never lost a battle (Dobson, April 2004).

This raises the “defense of the family” to a matter of divine importance, depicting Dobson and his followers as biblical characters on a quest to win a cosmic war. The rhetoric of war implies the impossibility of compromise. War sets out the parameters of identity, giving the group a clear sense of who they are, who they are not, and what they need to do. But more importantly, the appeal to warfare is “an assertion of power.” The struggle for victory amounts to a struggle for power, for domination over the Other (Juergensmeyer, 158). Cosmic battles essentially seek to combat chaos itself. Religion employs symbols of violence to assert its dominion over disorder. “When religious cultures portray warfare as something that is acknowledged and ultimately controlled, they are presenting an almost cosmological reenactment of the primacy of order over chaos” (Juergensmeyer, 162).

Dobson presents his war as one between the spiritual soldiers of faith, valiantly fighting in the name of righteousness, and the (phallic) arm of flesh, the morally depraved enemies of the family and order itself. For fundamentalists, social and cosmic order rests on a strict adherence to their polar, thoroughly androcentric model of gender. Gays and lesbians, activists or not, challenge traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, upsetting the hierarchy between the sexes. Fundamentalists therefore turn homosexuality into a matter of gender, insisting that homosexuals are simply confused about their gender; if they could clean up this misunderstanding, a proper sexual orientation would follow. Needless to say, this fails to account for masculine gay males and feminine lesbians; it precludes any multifaceted description of human experience.

The demythicized war Dobson fights is ultimately over who gets to define gender. The video starring SpongeBob elicited such a strong reaction from Dobson because, to him, it represented but one of the morally reprehensible attempts to confuse children about their supposedly innate gender. Dobson was ridiculed in the media because he seemed to be worrying about whether a cartoon sponge was engaging in homosexual acts. But his real concern was neither SpongeBob's nor anyone's else sexual activity. Rather, he assumed that the video was incorrectly promoting the fluidity of gender identity to prevent young boys from leaving their mothers and assuming their male identities, and ultimately, their proper places in the public sphere. Without an authoritative male presence teaching boys to assert their maleness and thus their authority in the world, there would be no social order. For Dobson, homosexuality primarily threatens society because homosexual identity interferes with the early formation of masculinity, and the formation of masculinity is the necessary condition for a stable society. The media laughed at Dobson because he was fixated on a children's video, but for him, that was exactly the point.

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