



tough love

sexuality, compassion, and the christian right

cynthia burack

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SUNY series in Queer Politics and Cultures

Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, editors

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I also would like to acknowledge my debt to the writers whose work I concentrate on in this book: Hannah Arendt, Ayn Rand, and Melanie Klein. Why Arendt, Rand, and Klein? Each of these thinkers has something fascinating to say about the subject at hand. As theorists, all three were produced and influenced by notoriously violent social and political events of their time and place: for Arendt and Klein, World War II and the genocidal campaign against European Jews; for Rand, who was also Jewish, the Bolshevik Revolution and the early years of the Soviet state. They were contemporaries and émigrés; all three ended up speaking and writing in English, a language that was not their mother tongue. I imagine them in a dialogue—or more likely a lively debate—with each other over fundamental issues, the “human condition.” This book situates them in something like that debate on the intersection of politics, sexuality, and compassion.

I have come to believe that today many have a particularly shortsighted view of gender nonnormativity, one that typically involves same-sex sexuality, transgender identity, or obviously transgressive modes of

dress or public deportment. That's a shame because such an understanding misses deeper modes of nonconformity that aren't as accessible to view and that, as a result, don't fall under the scope of the popular concept of gender performativity as it is usually interpreted. Arendt, Rand, and Klein were middle-class heterosexual European women, the kind of women who, in the world that produced them, would not have been expected to engage in work that commanded the attention of thoughtful people, not just in their own time but well beyond it. Not only that: each brazenly defied some, if not all, norms associated with respectable womanhood. It is no insult to contemporary theorists to assert that we can still learn something from these women today.

Introduction

The Christian Right's Compassionate Conservatism

In November 2006, the Reverend Joel Hunter, pastor of a Florida megachurch, announced that he had decided not to serve as the new president of the Christian Coalition after having been designated as the conservative Christian organization's next president only a month earlier. In media coverage of the resignation, Hunter was quoted as saying that he had wanted the Coalition to pursue an agenda of "compassion issues": "I hope we can break out of 'liberal' and 'conservative.' I'm not sure when compassion became fitted under 'liberal.'"¹ In 2008, Hunter was enlisted as one of then-presidential candidate Barack Obama's prayer partners and later delivered the closing prayer at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. Hunter is one of many Christian conservative leaders who is designated as a "new evangelical"; ostensibly moderate, Hunter diverges from many in the Christian right by urging Christian conservatives to expand their agenda to include such issues as poverty and climate change. However, this expansion of the agenda has its limits. Like his more traditional fellow believers, Hunter rejects abortion rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights and recognition.²

A compassionate sociopolitical agenda that is prolife and antigay is increasingly a feature of American political life.³ Over the last twenty years, the Christian right has matured as a social and political movement, and its compassionate projects and pedagogies on contested moral/cultural issues such as sexual and reproductive rights are one manifestation of that maturation. In some of its ideology and activism on sexuality the

Christian right has added softened rhetoric and a variety of compassionate projects to its more familiar repertoire of harsh public rhetoric and punitive policy recommendations.⁴

Critics of the right often dismiss “compassionate conservatism” as an empty slogan intended to mystify the real roots and aspirations of conservative politics. What is Christian right compassion? Or to be more specific, what kind of compassion—if that is what it is—circulates through conservative Christian activities and activism? I argue that close attention to Christian right compassion, its modes of dissemination, and its effects provides important information about Christian conservatism, notions of traditional morality, and contemporary American culture and political life. But to reach that understanding, critics of the Christian right must be willing to take Christian right compassion seriously. That is, we must be willing to forestall reductive readings of compassion as a manipulative political strategy. Some students of the Christian right, including Melani McAlister, Bruce Pilbeam, and Chip Berlet, take this kind of perspective on compassion.⁵ Their work, and the work of other scholars I draw upon below, encourages students of ideology not to settle for superficial explanations of either left or right when examining political motivations.

In this book I make a case for why we should give the Christian right’s compassionate projects this kind of careful attention. To accomplish this I trace the lineaments of a variety of Christian right projects that are understood explicitly by those who develop them, those who work within them, and those who are served by them to be undergirded and motivated by Christian compassion. Then, to illuminate the operations of compassion and what is at stake in its deployment in sexuality politics, I turn to the work of theorists whose quite different orientations toward democratic politics, love, and compassion enable us to reconceptualize and critique Christian right compassionate interventions into the sexual and reproductive dimensions of intimacy.

Although Reverend Hunter pronounced himself confused about the link drawn by many between liberalism and compassion, the link is well established in popular ideology and in the social and policy aspirations of welfare liberals and progressives. As a mode of political motivation, compassion is usually identified with welfare liberals, whom conservative critics have understood as compassionate in ways that are excessive and misplaced. The bleeding heart of left-wing politics constitutes a well-known stereotype. Not coincidentally, the stereotype licenses ridicule of putative softness, weakness, and, as scholars such as George Lakoff point

out, gestures to the effeminacy of a parent who nurtures instead of setting boundaries and dispensing punishment.⁶

The alternative, which Lakoff also describes, represents the other side of a binary cognitive model that those on both the political left and political right use to conceptualize politics in terms of family life. Nor is this distinction merely hypothetical. A study of political behavior finds support for Lakoff's theory that Americans use binary cognitive schemas to conceptualize politics in terms of family life. Using 2000 National Election Study data, James Barker and James D. Tinnick III conclude that "values regarding childrearing predicted political attitudes across a variety of issue domains," including gay rights and abortion rights.⁷ When "the family" operates as a metaphor for conceptions of morality, Christian conservatives rally to a "strict father Christianity" that prioritizes authority and order and that entails punishment for violations of the moral order.⁸ Christian conservative compassion thus aspires to displace, circumvent, and subvert corrupt liberal compassion and substitute for it something that bears some resemblance but that is both meaningfully different and more biblically virtuous.

The link between liberalism and compassion also finds support from social psychology. For many years psychologists have investigated and confirmed correlations between personality traits and liberal/conservative ideological orientations.⁹ In some of these studies personality dimensions highlighted in the so-called "Big Five" model of personality—variations of extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, and intellect—are strongly identified with either liberal or conservative political beliefs. One Big Five dimension that has not been seen by psychologists as identified either with liberal or conservative ideology is "agreeableness," but recent research suggests that the ostensible political neutrality of this personality dimension has been overstated. When "agreeableness" is disarticulated into constitutive subtraits of "compassion" and "politeness," the liberal/conservative neutrality of agreeableness disappears. In its place are consistent correlations between conservative ideology and politeness and between liberal ideology and compassion. Here, compassion is "empirically and conceptually related to the value domain of egalitarianism."¹⁰

Whatever form conservative compassion takes in the political realm, for its proponents it must compare favorably with a liberal ideology that, under the sign of egalitarian ideals, ignores moral corruption and lets evil off the hook. For Christian conservatives, compassionate campaigns in the areas of sexuality and reproductive rights not only compare favorably

with liberal compassion but share other similarities with each other. First, they seem to conflict with other conservative approaches to these cultural issues that are harsher in tone and punitive toward their objects, and second, they include careful instruction about political processes related to the issue area. Besides the general forms of political pedagogy associated with them, there are also important differences of substance that reflect the distinctions between the arenas in which compassionate antigay and antiabortion projects are carried out.

The arena for antigay compassion campaigns in the area of gay rights is the ex-gay movement, which includes instruction for conservative Christians on the origins and treatment of same-sex desire. Ex-gay pedagogy rests on narratives of development that seek to chart etiologies of same-sex desire and to foreclose blame toward those afflicted with such desires.¹¹ In the area of antiabortion politics, general-purpose groups, single-issue organizations, and megachurches have launched a number of initiatives that distance critics of abortion rights from murder rhetoric and approach abortion from a compassionate perspective.¹² Proponents of this sector of the antiabortion movement refer to it as “postabortion awareness and recovery ministries” or simply “postabortion ministries,” for short, and I follow this nomenclature.

One question that might arise in considering the compassion campaigns of the Christian right movement in the areas of sexuality and reproductive rights is whether LGBTQ people and women who have had an abortion need compassion—indeed, whether compassion is an appropriate category of political thinking and motivation when it comes to these citizens. This is a legitimate concern and one addressed by a number of scholars who are concerned either with the condition of the public sphere or with the standing of particular categories of citizens. My goal here is neither to make the case that the Christian right emphasis on compassion represents an appropriate application of political emotion nor to make a case for extirpating compassion from politics altogether. I return to this question of the role of compassion in politics in the afterword, but for now my focus on compassion is explanatory and analytical. In this text, I present evidence that compassionate ministries are not only theological, but also social and political projects. I analyze these projects and make three major arguments about Christian right compassion: first, that it encourages an undemocratic politics of ideological moral meddling; second, that it encourages invidious political distinctions between deserving and undeserving citizens; and third, that it discourages responsibility for harm-doing to those it stigmatizes.

Left, Right, Left: Forward March

Compassion has a long political history, and intellectuals as diverse as Aristotle, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Susan Sontag have limned its definitions, conditions of possibility, manifestations, and effects.¹³ A definition that circulates in many discussions is Aristotle's, which specifies three evaluative judgments as its condition: that what has befallen a person is very serious; that it is not (or not only) the person's fault; and that it exposes the observer's vulnerability to similar possibilities.¹⁴ As Lauren Berlant notes, although there are many versions and definitions of this prolix term, one way to understand compassion is as "an emotion in operation." Compassion is relational, alluding to the action between sufferer(s) and actors who are capable of responding to or alleviating suffering: "Compassion measures one's value (or one's government's value) in terms of the demonstrated capacity not to turn one's head away but to embrace a sense of obligation to remember what one has seen and, in response to that haunting, to become involved in a story of rescue or amelioration."¹⁵ This unavoidable relationality contains within it a potential pitfall of compassion: the conscious willingness to withhold it. As Elizabeth Spelman points out in her consideration of the "political life of compassion," calls for compassion can engender cruel condescension as well as harsh judgments on the moral agency of sufferers.

There is also a pedagogical dimension to compassion: "[I]t is crucial to appreciate the multitude of conventions around the relation of feeling to practice where compassion is concerned. In a given scene of suffering, how do we know what does and what should constitute sympathetic agency?"¹⁶ Spelman examines Harriet Jacobs' 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* and finds Jacobs/Linda Brent enunciating the responses she wants her story to evoke from her white Northern readers. Similarly, the pedagogy that infuses right-wing compassion is a key component of compassion campaigns. One way that citizens learn what constitutes appropriate compassionate agency is by having their ideas about compassion informed by instruction within the context of broad sets of collective political impulses—for example, orientations toward "the family" and morality. Like progressive compassion, which is a form of pedagogy as well as an ideology, compassionate conservatism operates as pedagogy for those predisposed toward conservative explanations and situated in conservative social and political contexts. In the case of the Christian right, moral and theological instruction and policy goals are linked together and disseminated

by ministries and national organizations, as well as through Christian popular culture.

The conservative alternative to left compassion is compassionate conservatism, a creed with a political, as well as an intellectual, genealogy. Popularized by conservative theorist Marvin Olasky, compassionate conservatism repudiates the public policies associated with the welfare state for ignoring the moral and spiritual needs of their recipients.¹⁷ During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush appealed to bipartisanship and compassionate conservatism, although he softened the edges of the concept by not enunciating fully the critique of liberal compassion found in the work of conservatives like Olasky and Charles Murray.¹⁸

During the Bush administration, the following passage appeared above Bush's name in a press release on the White House website. The page, entitled "Fact Sheet: Compassionate Conservatism" begins: "I call my philosophy and approach compassionate conservatism. It is compassionate to actively help our fellow citizens in need. It is conservative to insist on responsibility and results. And with this hopeful approach, we will make a real difference in people's lives."¹⁹ What followed was a laundry list of ideas, policies, and action items the president's advisors understood as consistent with compassion as a "governing philosophy." As Bruce Pilebeam points out, Bush's compassionate conservatism was always at odds with the conception of that ideal wrought by its authors because it was insufficiently committed to foreclosing big government programs and devolving assistance to the poor to community organizations.²⁰ Bush did, however, conceptualize compassionate conservatism as authorizing funding and support of antiabortion Crisis Pregnancy Centers and programs.²¹

Such critiques of the large bureaucratic welfare state set the stage for contemporary compassionate conservatives to decry liberal compassion not only as requiring a large state that flies in the face of libertarian aspirations but as indiscriminate: as failing to distinguish appropriately between those of good and poor character. Indeed, the inculcation of virtue and the eviction of those who fail or refuse to live up to prescribed moral standards are the very point and purpose of close contact between those who deliver social welfare services and those who need them.²² A conservative spokesperson who illustrates the effectiveness of such arguments is Star Parker, an author, popular speaker on the Christian right circuit, and founder of CURE, the Center for Urban Renewal and Education. Although Parker rarely sounds like a compassionate conservative, the biography she recites in her work and in public addresses,

her critique of the devastating consequences of welfare state amorality, and her commitment to “fighting poverty and restoring dignity through faith, freedom and personal responsibility” resonate with the tenets of conservative compassion.²³

For activists on the political left, skepticism about compassionate conservatism takes two forms: skepticism about motivation and skepticism about content. With regard to motivation, critics read compassionate conservatism against the backdrop of conservative appropriations of liberal ideals and practices. These include the appropriation of civil rights discourse that places conservatives on the side of minorities seeking civil rights; a reconfiguration of equality that rebuffs concern with inequality of wealth and income as “class warfare”; and a redefinition—and even partial embrace—of feminism.²⁴ Of these, the Christian right appropriation of feminism may be the most surprising development. As Doris Buss and Didi Herman point out, this strategy has an older, less sophisticated version: “marginalizing feminists as raging radicals.” But it also has a newer and more sophisticated version, which is, for example, practiced by the Vatican in international politics: representing “radical” feminism as inadequate to serve the world’s women. Echoing much internal feminist critique, this narrative situates the feminist movement as simultaneously a regional, “western-dominated movement” that fails to represent the diversity of women in the global south, as a movement that fails to represent even the diversity of Western women, and as a movement that cannot meet the range of women’s needs because of its reliance on a narrow rights agenda.²⁵ Here, conservatives appropriate internal feminist critiques of white, Western, middle-class feminism and deploy them against dimensions of feminism that are inconvenient and antagonistic to traditionalism.

Another kind of appropriation is the migration of sociological explanations of dysfunctional or antisocial behavior from the left to the right. Sociological explanations of criminality that cite poverty or membership in an underclass have usually been rejected by the right as justifications for harm purveyed by ethically challenged left-wing apologists—“defining deviancy down,” in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s alliterative phrase.²⁶ However, the right now acknowledges the usefulness of some sociological characterization by mimicking such explanations for women who choose abortion. Such women may be characterized as “wounded” by early life traumas, thus impaired in their ability to engage in moral thinking and action. In particular cases, Christian conservatives now often consider the effects of trauma in the same ways that progressives often have: not

to excuse particular categories of harmful actions, but to explain their genesis and to understand the individual cognitive and emotional—if not the social—circumstances in which individuals make decisions.

Those on the left who are particularly critical of the content of compassionate conservatism target different aspects of the governing philosophy. Some tend to be skeptical that the ideal means anything more than a marriage between neoliberal market ideology and social conservatism: an attempt to mystify business interests and market them to culturally conservative citizens. Linda Kintz shows how it is that the antigovernment populism of “ordinary Americans” is fused and confused with the antitax and antiregulatory interests of corporations in the constitution of a “Transparent American Subject” that represents (Southern) conservatism.²⁷ Although they do not always call attention to potential conflicts of interest between their own culturally conservative concerns and the interests of business elites, Christian right leaders are aware that they must be attentive to the propensity of the Republican Party to marginalize their policy interests in favor of a business agenda.²⁸ Some academic critics emphasize other problems with the content of compassionate conservatism. In her critique, Nancy Campbell charges Olasky and William J. Bennett with using a flawed historical narrative of American social policy to undergird a current set of policy initiatives. These initiatives redefine “coercion as a compassionate form of discipline and control,” especially over poorer citizens and those who violate traditionalist ideals of character and behavior.

As much as critics and proponents of compassionate conservatism disagree, however, neither would dispute that at the heart of conservative compassion is the necessity to draw distinctions and make boundaries between categories of objects. Conservative compassion splits the objects of political attention into groups, directing compassion toward one group and condemnation toward the other. For Christian conservatives, this means compassion toward people who resist their same-sex desires and condemnation toward people who embrace some kind of queer identity; compassion toward repentant women who have had abortions and condemnation toward those who advocate abortion rights. Although today it is conservatives who are most comfortable with values talk in their politics, clearly there are quite different sets of values at work in left and right perspectives on compassion and in the respective critiques that each side levels at the other.

Conservative critiques of left compassion take many forms, some more direct than others. ConservativeHome, a website that provides “com-

prehensive coverage of Britain's conservative party," denounces "condom (or Russian roulette) compassion" as the "dangerous belief that people can be protected from sexual promiscuity or drug use." While conservative "advocates of harm avoidance believe that people can be persuaded, cajoled or frightened into changing their behaviours," liberal "harm reducers" "believe that it is better to protect people from the consequences of their behaviours than to try and change those behaviours"²⁹ Compassionate conservatism, by contrast, is "optimistic about how conservative ideas . . . can advance social justice."³⁰ While the term "condom compassion" is not part of the general discourse on the threat posed by liberal compassion, the idea that liberals are indifferent to the consequences of personally or socially disastrous behavior—or even perversely encourage them—is common.

It is by no means the case that all American conservatives would identify themselves or their aspirations as "compassionate." At times, conservatives who repudiate the compassionate label scorn the loss of core conservative principles that such a concept may encourage. In addition, conservative public figures such as Ann Coulter base their reputations on a pugilism and punitiveness that is hard to square with compassionate rhetoric and principles. But even in venues where conservative activists meet to network and to hear conservative leaders, compassion is often a theme, the tea party movement's recent repudiation of the ideal notwithstanding. Seeking to recuperate the descriptor long after it was largely abandoned by President G. W. Bush, Bush speechwriter and political commentator Michael Gerson invoked it to account for the appeal of Senator Rick Santorum in the 2012 Iowa Caucuses. Gerson wrote of Santorum's surprising success in the Caucuses as "the return of compassionate conservatism from the margins of the Republican stage to its center."³¹ Within the movement, the doctrine of "co-belligerence" that justifies groups such as Protestants and Catholics working together for common ends also describes the way in which compassionate and other conservatives often negotiate different paths to common political ends.³²

The Faces of Compassion

Many advocates for abortion rights and LGBTQ rights are convinced that the conservative compassion of the Christian right movement is a political strategy rather than an authentic orientation. The justification for this belief is not far to seek. First, the compassion of the Christian right is

still antiabortion and antigay; indeed, it would be legitimate to modify the compassion with which I'm concerned and refer to it consistently as "antiabortion compassion" or "antigay compassion" to distinguish it from other forms of compassion that do not share its provenance and pedagogical aspirations. Second, people who are the ideal objects of the antiabortion and antigay political projects of the Christian right often understand themselves as harmed by those projects regardless of the fellow feeling that may motivate their enactment. The gap between harm—fear of identification, loss of rights, social stigma, loss of employment related to discrimination, inability to procure benefits that other citizens take for granted—and the professed love and concern of organized others can engender suspicion and cynicism. This is so both for LGBT people and for women who have had an abortion, who support the right to abortion, and who will avail themselves of the right to have an abortion in the future.

It makes sense that activists in the queer and prochoice movements reject the idea of conservative Christian compassion. From the homophile movement of the post-WWII period to the present day, the path to a political movement of and for people with same-sex sexual orientation or nonnormative gender identity and expression has required repudiating stubborn social attitudes and traditional moral convictions (to say nothing of visceral feelings) about the detestability of same-sex desire and sexuality. People who come out as gay, bisexual, queer, or transgender usually grow up steeped in these traditions and modes of feeling. As a result, we recognize the invitations to shame and renunciation held out by antigay politics and religion. And many of us who do not renounce our sexuality nevertheless recognize the tantalizing prospect of acceptance that our ex-gay compatriots respond to when they renounce their sexual and romantic feelings, appoint "accountability partners" to help them manage their identities, and ask God for forgiveness for their sexual transgressions.

Advocates of abortion rights know the contentious history of reproductive rights in the United States from criminalization in the nineteenth century to the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* and the prolife mobilization of the 1970s to the present. Indeed, since the Court's 1965 decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which gave married couples the right to birth control information and technologies, the idea that Americans enjoy a constitutionally protected right to privacy in intimate decision making has been under attack. The innovation of antiabortion politics since the 1980s is the targeting of individuals—women who seek abortions and abortion providers—for publicity, harassment, and some-

times violence.³³ In this context, compassionate concern for women who are making, or who have made, an abortion decision, can seem either a striking departure from the movement's course or yet another technique of shaming citizens into sexual abstinence and conformity.³⁴

The Christian right's compassion campaigns are undeniably strategic, intended as they are to buttress widespread support for denying LGBT people access to rights and public goods and women their reproductive rights, choices, or justice. However, these campaigns are not strategic without remainder, which is to say that they do not *only* exist to mystify the real aims of conservative Christian morality politics. The assumption that Christian right compassion discourse is merely strategic window dressing for punitive politics is a reasonable one. However, if this were so we might expect to encounter compassion discourse only or virtually only in public settings—contexts in which movement leaders communicate the movement's goals and principles to those outside the ingroup and act to secure political goods such as laws and court decisions. On the contrary, the Christian right movement is rife with compassion discourse directed toward ingroup members at the very same time that leaders produce and direct to those same members of the ingroup quite different narratives of homosexual abomination and child murder. What this suggests is that Christian right movement leaders are not inept at producing political rhetoric on these two core moral and political issues of our time, but neither are they merely manipulating public opinion. Rather, the bifurcation between the narratives of compassion and abomination signals that Christian right ideology is complex and that Christian conservatives are being called upon to internalize and deploy meaningful moral and political distinctions on these issues.

It is also true that at least some aspects of compassion campaigns seem to be generated in response to public criticisms of Christian right politics. For example, for many years, critics of the movement's antiabortion rights politics charged that the Christian right evinces concern with endangered fetuses and not with pregnant women, babies, and their material needs. In response, the movement has reconfigured its antiabortion projects to respond to the needs of women and children as the movement understands them, including some material needs of pregnant women and infants. In addition to the charitable work of church congregations, some of these needs have been addressed through Crisis Pregnancy Centers. Of course, the primary objective of Crisis Pregnancy Centers is to persuade pregnant women not to have an abortion, and these antiabortion non-profit organizations have been identified as sources of false advertising

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