



Review of Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey,
*Between a Man and a Woman? Why
Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage*
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)
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In *Between a Man and Woman? Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage*, religion scholar—Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey—argues that intellectuals have not yet cultivated a sufficiently nuanced understanding of American conservative Christian resistance to state-sanctioned gay marriage. Too often, for Viefhues-Bailey, conservative Christians are assumed to reject same-sex marriages because of their presumed adherence to a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. Such a myopic view of conservative Christians' understandings of sexuality, religiosity, and power relations obfuscates the contested, negotiated, and lived experiences of the people under discussion, thereby providing little insight into how conservative Christians produce and reproduce gender and sexuality norms that are resonant for many Americans. In highly-accessible writing, Viefhues-Bailey sets out to analyze the rhetoric of conservative Christian opposition to same-sex marriage, thus contributing to the growing body of literature that examines how the discourse of American Christian heteronormativity is naturalized through Protestant notions of gender, marriage, respectability, and civilized family units, which conservative Christians regard as essential to the well-being and success of the American nation state.

In an attempt to explore conservative Christian messages about gender, sexuality, and marriage, Viefhues-Bailey analyzes ample material produced by the Christian organization Focus on the Family, which, according to the author, appeals to conservative Protestants of varying denominations and locales through the proliferation of the group's magazines, websites, books, and other media. Rather than critiquing Focus' argumentation, Viefhues-Bailey delves into Focus' texts to investigate the creation, maintenance, and use of rhetorical figures in conservative Christian America. For example, he proffers that the authors of Focus materials construct and perpetuate two static images of gay men, which he terms the "over-sexed hyper-male" and the "gender-insecure hypo-male." The first is portrayed as predatory, particularly toward young boys; the second is imagined as lacking a father figure and unfamiliar with proper masculine behavior. Both are figured as promiscuous and prone to drug use. Viefhues-Bailey argues that these rhetorical figures serve to create normative Christian male gender and sexuality performances, whereby the Christian American man is constructed as one who does not embody any of the qualities associated with the "over-sexed hyper-male" or the "gender-insecure hypo-male." Consumers of Focus publications are inculcated with prescriptive and proscriptive gender and sexual performances that serve both in the formation of their own embodied gender and sexual practices, as well as in the shaping of their views on the possibilities of same-sex relationships. Viefhues-Bailey asserts that the very creation and repetition of rhetorical figures speaks to the

instability and tenuousness of conservative Christian heteronormative gender and sexual scripts, thus requiring the norms to be constantly (re)inscribed and (re)enforced.

The configured image of the deviant gay male is the latest iteration of rhetorical figures that are constructed for the purpose of establishing an alterity against which American Christians can judge themselves. He writes, "Part of the production of white masculinity, for example, is the imagination and cultural depiction of black male sexuality as out of bounds, violent and savage ... Native men were presented as being overly feminine or childlike (and thus needing European masculine rule)" (p. 140). In other words, Christian and white ideas about normative masculinity are—historically and presently—imbricated, an extension of what Viefhues-Bailey sees as the effects of colonialism and the subjugation of peoples on "civilized" Christian and gender sexual ideals. Just as non-whites and non-Christians have been portrayed as barbaric, sinful, and uncivilized, the "deviant gay body [now] functions in analogy to the construction of 'the savage black male,' namely to stabilize respectable middle-class masculinity" (p. 140). Viefhues-Bailey aptly argues that the vilification of gay men as predators, pedophiles, and sex addicts serves to maintain Protestant gender and sexual ideals as epitomes of gentility, appropriateness, and social stability. For conservatives to sanction same-sex marriages would be to destabilize Christian heteronormativity as the ideal gender and sexual model for the "civilized" American nation.

While Catholics have esteemed celibacy, and Mormons have endorsed polygamy, American Protestants have overwhelmingly valorized monogamous heterosexual matrimony as the sexual ideal; Viefhues-Bailey, therefore, posits that Protestant sexual norms contribute to situating America as an explicitly Christian country. He writes, "U.S. officials were quick to believe that immigrants from groups they considered to be racially inferior (such as Jews and Asians) were incapable of forming the 'true' romantic bonds that were the hallmarks of Christian marriage" (p. 74). State endorsement of heterosexual monogamous marriage serves as a mechanism for allowing Protestant sexual ideals to determine American norms. When conservative Christians defend heterosexual marriage as the sole legitimate matrimonial option, they are fighting to maintain the idea of America as a Christian nation. When they oppose same-sex marriages, they present such relationships as antithetical to both Christianity and to the stability of the United States. For conservative Christians, heterosexual marriage is the locus of the American social order, principally because the structure inculcates submission as a necessary value. Viefhues-Bailey suggests that the patriarchal conservative Protestant family system where children submit to parents, wives submit to husbands, and husbands submit to God, replicates the submission that is necessary to the nation in order for it to function optimally. "The desire to live in a society structured by a sexual hierarchy of submission and to anchor claims of authority in some cosmic order seems to resonate well with many Americans" (p. 128). Put differently, a conservative Christian ontology includes ideas about unique gender roles within the social order, particularly with regard to men serving as heads of their households. Conservative Christians oppose lesbianism and feminism not because they are seen as predatory or promiscuous like gay men, but because they subvert claims about the necessity of a gender hierarchy. Same-sex marriage, therefore, signifies a major threat to what

conservative Christians have deemed the natural social order of the nation and the universe.

Between a Man and a Woman? is a thoughtfully argued work that presents ideas of how conservative Christian assertions remain pervasive and successful in America. Readers interested in a close analysis of conservative Christian rhetoric about gender, sexuality, and marriage will find this text helpful and engaging.

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