

"Religion, Sexual Orientation and the Law"

BY JADE WOLFE
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The Seventh Annual Alliance Conference was held at the Vermont Law School in South Royalton, Vermont. The Alliance is a small, dedicated group of gay/lesbian students. Program coordinator, Dan Stafford and Stephanie Tavez, greeted me as I collected my conference materials.

Entitled "Religion, Sexual Orientation and the Law", the all day event featured discussions among three sets of panelists. Professor Susan Ackerman moderated "What Religion Really says about Homosexuality"; Sharon Debbage moderated "Gay Rights vs. Religious Liberty: Does the U.S. Constitution Allow for Both?" and Stephanie Tavez moderated "The Impact of Faith-Based Initiatives on the GLBT Community." Keynote speaker, Professor David B. Cruz and his partner celebrated their civil union ceremony prior to the conference. Professor Cruz spoke about the finer legal points of dis-establishing the religion of gender within the confines of the United States laws in his keynote address entitled "On Nature Worship and the U.S. Constitution".

"At best, religion is the politics of spirituality". These were my own words said many times in conversation. Attending an all day conference focused on religion and law was an interesting challenge for me. My reactions filtered through as a writer for OITM, former social service advocate and believer in personal spirituality however best it is nurtured. In the space of a minute's worth of conference dialogue, my senses moved through many layers of thoughts and perceptions. I recalled my own childhood experiences with religion. The varied aspects of a fundamentalist upbringing shaped and confined my own awareness as a spiritual being. At one time I seriously considered a career in law, actually enjoying the LSAT experience. But I could not get "my head wrapped around" the concept of besting your opponents in a "game of wording" in order to win. Those who can practice law in spite of these restrictions and people who teach and share religious practices with spiritual meaning and good intent have my respect.

In many ways, the institutions of religion and law operate very similarly. There is recognizable common ground. Both are highly structured patriarchal systems. The variances between are eclipsed by the similarity in their organizational hierarchies with the inherent procedural mazes. These two institutions profess dictums regarding our daily lives. This alone presents an argument for a separation between "church and state". Individual spirituality, a place within our community, and individual behavior as it affects the community seem to all work much better when the church is, indeed, separate from the state.

There is more gray area than solid "separation". This was illustrated admirably during the civil union litigation in Vermont. The fear-based arguments of legislative representatives who are "anti-gay" reach up from within deep-seated religious dogma. There was hardly any point of legislation or law ever brought up in the public arena. Though the topics slated for discussion in the panels were obviously emotionally



Stephanie Tavez, one of the Program coordinators of "Religion, Sexual Orientation and the Law", is a member of The Alliance, a small, dedicated group of gay and lesbian students at Vermont Law School.

charged issues, it seemed fitting. After all, the institutions of law and religion overshadow one another constantly. They also have served as reciprocal supporters since their establishment. American rhetoric has a few very "worn with use" popular battle cries. As I sat through this long conference the two phrases that moved back and forth in my mind were "religious freedoms" and "fair and equal protection under the law".

As was true in the most heated moments of the civil union debates, the anti-gay proponents in conference attendance here mentioned legislative points of debate as an afterthought, if at all. The discussions were lively at times. There were over half a dozen "anti-gay" attendees. Somewhat boisterously "checking in" ahead of me in line, there were two fundamentalist preachers. And the part of me observing these two men saw the uncomfortable, furtive glances at me and then around the room. Here were two narrowly socialized people trying to operate successfully between their religion and their government.

They must have felt an odd sense of support when the Catholic Priest presented his portion of panel discussion. The priest read word for word from a type written page the church's non-discrimination of homosexuals. Within the body of this declaration we learned that he, himself, was a non-practicing heterosexual. It would have been hard to miss, since he stated it not once, not twice, but seven times within less than twelve minutes.

The legislative representatives remained focused on campaigning and could not seem to think or listen beyond their self-imposed barriers. Although valid points regarding actual religious texts were presented, again only open-minded ears seem to grasp any of the information. The audience was a small, diverse group.

People moved into small groups to eat throughout the conference area. There was a dozen or so anti-gays (their label, not mine) swapping notes on potential campaign sound-bites. The tireless law staff hovered over the lunch crowd to ensure the conference was continuing to "flow on schedule". A few sat in clumps of threes and twos but gently migrated into one larger group for an intimate discussion. One of the presenters, Dr. Rembert Truluck sat with us as we shared thoughts and past experiences.

The conference was important. It was a natural way of continually educating our selves and those who choose likewise. On Friday, the 5th we set aside usual schedules to meet one another, discussing these invariably joined institutions. At the very least, The 7th Annual Conference on Sexual Orientation and the Law, reminded everyone of the delicate lack of neutrality present in the gray areas where law and religion reside.

Driving back toward Burlington, the incredible views of a Vermont fall foliage fit perfectly with the human variances of the day. Fortunately, the spectacular blending of autumn colors could not be constrained by individual differences. We might want to step back for a moment and appreciate the beauty of our human vista. It is there.



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