

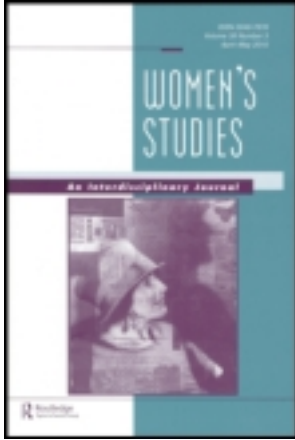
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### Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey. Between a Man and a Woman? Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage

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## BOOK REVIEW

Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey. *Between a Man and a Woman? Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010.

BY TANIA ZITTOUN

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Why do Christian religious organizations oppose same-sex marriage? In raising this question, Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey embarks on a journey that reveals some of the hidden logic of America's self-maintenance. Understanding the opposition to same-sex marriage as both a political and a religious issue, the author presents five dense chapters which, after a methodological introduction, examine religious discourse about same-sex marriage, the marriage model prevalent in Christian groups and more generally in American society, models of femininity and masculinity and finally, the field of tension these aspects create and their consequences for religious same-sex marriage.

Viefhues-Bailey focuses his analysis on "Conservative Christians in America today [which] are those who are claimed by and are using a certain way of speaking, one whose history is connected to the European and American reformations" (4). They can be seen

... as characterized by the following use of language: The language of biblical inerrancy, personal salvation, and evangelism serve to define the church and its internal conflicts and those involving others who claim to be Christians. (6)

Methodologically, Viefhues-Bailey builds his demonstration along three threads. First, he presents a case study on *Focus on the family*, an "immensely influential ministry, counseling, and media organization" (6) founded by James Dobson, a former professor of child psychology. This organization's powerful communications network diffuses videos, radio shows, websites and magazines for

teenage men and women. It trains pastors, designs educational programs for Church schools and families; it answers individual queries and offers support through therapy-like guidance. *Focus on the Family* reaches an estimated audience of 70 millions people. Analyzing it both produces an exemplary case study and an entry on “a main producer and distributor of such speech” (8). In addition to the case study, the author offers some comparative data—both diachronic, as in the case of the history of Christian positions, and synchronic, using the case of one Buddhist group as well as data reflecting the various positions of the members of other Christian groups. Finally, Viefhues-Bailey engages in dialogue with other scholars of religion as well as authors from the social and political sciences.

On a more epistemological level, inspired by Wittgenstein, the author identifies a “‘grammar’ of the idea of same-sex love in the language circulated by conservative Christian organizations” (25). Viefhues-Bailey examines the discourse produced by *Focus* itself in its leaflets and webpages, studies readers’ and users’ questions and the answers they receive, listens to the formal statements of the leaders of that church and finally aligns these locally produced discourses with current political discourses. In doing so, the author proposes an examination of what he calls the *resonances* between discourses at an inter-discursive and inter-textual level (27), which take the shape of a continuous circulation of knowledge, representations and values. This leads him to see his analysis as a “diagnostic”—which halts the circulation—and as “interpretation,” inviting the reader to consider statements in the light of their previous occurrences.

The main steps of Viefhues-Bailey’s analysis can be summarized as follows. First, conservative Christians’ positions on same-sex marriage are shown to be, strictly speaking, not religious. In effect, the Bible itself, treated as an authority by conservatism, is shown to be open to variations on the modalities of marriage—monogamous or polygamous, with in or out-groups, with reproductive goals or without, without prescription about same-sex marriage.

It shows that at stake in the debate about marriage is not the Bible per se (as an abstract thing) but cultural assumptions about secularity or about the place of men and women in family and nation. Any discussions of

biblical evidence for or against gay or lesbian sex therefore entail examining the wider religious and political resonances that are at play when scripture is read. (42)

Looking at *Focus*' arguments against same-sex marriage—which is seen as leading to sexual chaos, being “unnatural,” not fulfilling the reproductive function of marriage, etc.—Viefhues-Bailey eventually shows that the group's ideal marriage is one based on *romance*, concluded between freely-chosen partners who are both actively engaged in decision making. Such an ideal, he analyses, is however also mandated by the needs of a democratic state: it simply promotes the values required by the polity. It goes hand in hand with a certain ideal of middle-class *respectability* through which people actively work for and support society. Paradoxically, then, homosexual couples who long for a classical “marriage” fall into the trap of the glamorous romantic union promoted by the marriage industry that serves these political and religious goals. However, conservative Christians strongly deny the right to respectability to homosexual couples, and even publicize them as a serious threat to that project. What is the reason for such a rejection?

Viefhues-Bailey's next step is to analyze the rhetorical purpose of the strong diabolization of homosexuality in the activities of *Focus on the Family*. There, indeed, educational practices are meant to discourage potential homosexuality, and homoerotic tendencies are seen as a sickness to be cured through religious devotion. Moreover, homosexuals are presented as amoral, perverted, boundary-less, dangerous, and destructive. Through such conservative discourse, three figures of the homosexual constructed as the negative Other appear: the “hyper-male,” the “hypo-male,” and the “assertive feminist.” Mainly, Viefhues-Bailey argues, these figures serve the rhetorical function of promoting a normative power differential in Christian couples. The man should be strong, and the woman should be submissive to the man's God-given authority. At the same time, the man should himself submit to God (as the wife submits to him) and the woman should prevent her husband from abusing God. Hence, the author suggests, the model of marriage promoted by Christian conservatism is paradoxical and full of tensions: how can one be a dominant *and* a submissive male? How can a man engage in

a democratic debate with his freely chosen partner when God has given him complete authority over her? It is for the purpose of managing these tensions that the representations offered by same-sex couples serve as scapegoats in the discourse of conservatism. In other words, Christian conservatism needs the horizon of impossible same-sex unions to reassess its own values while avoiding questioning the internal tensions of its model. Seriously considering the issues raised by same-sex marriage, Viefhues-Bailey finally suggests, risks amounting to a questioning of God's gender.

One of the interesting elements in this analysis is its consideration of a semiosphere and its understanding of the circulation of knowledge—from implicit social representations in a given society through specific religious groups, and from these to specific individuals who then act as citizens in that society. Adopting a cultural psychology perspective,<sup>1</sup> one could say that if discourses about gender and religion circulate the way they do, it is because people read and listen to them and are sensitive to their shared meaning. And yet they try to give personal meaning to them as they are exposed to daily ruptures: what if my son prefers boys, what if my husband beats me. On the one hand, discourses on gender and religion, such as those promoted by *Focus on the Family* through its massive diffusion and its echoes with social representations, create redundant messages and impose normative choices and a certain aesthetic of life as self-obvious. Through such an organization, an active yet invisible semiotic guidance channels people's preferences and nourishes their imagination of possible lives. This semiotic guidance is revealed in detail by Viefhues-Bailey. On the other hand, however, as people appropriate such discourses into their own discourses and actions, they possess a margin of freedom; they interpret them and adjust them to their personal biographies and current needs. Consequently, these discourses are constantly revised and transformed, and because conflicting discourses exist in the semiosphere, it might maintain a certain dynamic.

My only reserve with Viefhues-Bailey's clear demonstration lies in the fact that his analysis ends up being circular: from the analyst's bird's-eye perspective, society appears closed to change,

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<sup>1</sup>See Valsiner 2007.

as it uses its minorities to reassess its majority norm. Perhaps an analysis that maintains a distinction between levels of agencies—political power, social representations or specific individuals—rather than treating them as one, infinitely diffracted discourse would open space for potential divergence. On the one hand, people have different intentions and purposes—the creators of a webpage use the Bible to justify a homophobic statement, and a teenager consults a religious webpage to find information about coming out. In the real world, change might come from the diversity of perspectives and the polity's inherent dialogicality.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, gay couples and other minorities might, through their resistance,<sup>3</sup> eventually reorganize the self-reproducing machinery of romance and respectability. Perhaps, then, to see the potential change in the relationships between religion, gender, and politics, we need to develop a more dialogical stance, making room for difference and diversity.

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<sup>2</sup>See Marková 2005.

<sup>3</sup>See Moscovici 1979.