



**Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right.** By Cynthia Burack. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. 224p. \$74.50 cloth, \$21.95 paper.  
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— Alesha E. Doan, *University of Kansas*

Who can forget the fiery rhetoric of Jerry Falwell two days following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks? During a guest appearance on Pat Robertson's *700 Club*

television program, Falwell offered the following analysis of the moral decay of America that precipitated the terrorist attacks: “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen’” (p. 109). Falwell’s comments were roundly criticized and dismissed by political and media elites as “hateful” and “divisive” talk. But, as Cynthia Burack argues in *Sin, Sex, and Democracy*, dismissing this language as political spectacle represents a woefully incomplete understanding of the Christian Right’s pedagogical use of rhetoric, and understates the significance of the movement to American politics.

Burack argues that the “Christian right has become more and more effective at designing and deploying multiple modes of address, different rhetorical tones, emphases, or arguments directed at ingroup and outgroup audience” (p. xxiii). She introduces a theoretical model that challenges scholars to reconceptualize the purposes and outcomes of the Christian Right’s use of narratives in promoting its political agenda. Her model is organized along two axes that produce a typology of the four dominant antigay narratives used by the Christian Right. The first axis contains the intended audience for the message (either in-group or out-group), whereas the second axis contains the sociopolitical context of the message (a therapeutic or political narrative).

The author explores her theoretical model through an examination of the narratives embedded in three distinct arenas: Christian witnessing tracts, the ex-gay movement, and the evolving construction of gays as terrorists. She is interested in tracing both the thought and activism associated with these aspects of the antigay agenda. Throughout the book, Burack argues that the seemingly disconnected narratives used by the movement actually intersect in patterned and comprehensive ways. The narratives, in turn, provide the movement with a two-prong political strategy: shoring up support for its political agenda from ideological supporters and packaging its agenda in a rhetorically palatable form for secular society.

Burack’s investigation begins with a detailed analysis of political rhetoric. Christian Right rhetoric is steeped in historical and theological traditions. The Christian Right has been adept at mapping contemporary events onto its historical and philosophical understanding of the world. Through this process, the movement has packaged its long-standing agenda in a modern voice intended to deliver political sway in a secular society. The author traces the origin and evolution of many key concepts that form the bedrock of the Christian Right’s religious and political ideologies. She examines concepts such as tolerance, choice, and rapture, demonstrating how these ideas form the philosophical underpinnings of the rhetoric used by the move-

ment. In turn, these central ideological tenets are folded into a pragmatic political action plan.

Part of this strategy has been the movement’s co-optation and appropriation of progressive social concepts. For example, elites of the Christian Right have been able to use the language of choice and rights to shift political outcomes closer to their preferences. The changes in its messaging has provided the movement with the means to situate its political agenda in mainstream public discourse over “liberal values” and legitimately compete for support from the larger political arena. As the book unfolds, the scope and importance of Burack’s research—beyond the antigay issue—quickly becomes evident. She marshals evidence and weaves together an argument that focuses on the centrality of the Christian Right movement within American politics.

Burack also documents the reciprocal and recursive relationship between the different factions of the movement. She argues that extremists have more than a benign influence on the mainstream movement. This is a less developed section of the book, particularly in regards to the development of the Christian Right’s social construction of homosexuals as terrorists. For example, Burack discusses Fred Phelps (an antigay extremist who resides in Topeka, Kansas, and heads up the Westboro Baptist Church and God Hates Fags Websites). Phelps has managed to capture state and national media attention with his outlandish political antics, even though he does not represent an identifiable constituency and has been publicly disavowed by the larger Christian Right movement. The relationship between Phelps and the Christian Right is unclear. He has championed many conservative issues over the years without any obvious affiliation or link to the Christian Right. His antigay activism may undercut the antigay agenda of the movement, or his extremism may aid it. The nuanced relationship between extremists and social movements (even when extremists are operating autonomously) continues to be an area in need of more research. The author could have made a more compelling contribution to this area by contextualizing and discussing the dual role that Phelps and other extremists play for the larger Christian Right movement, even if the extremists are not affiliated with the movement.

This minor criticism notwithstanding, in the end readers are left with rich insights and a theoretical framework that provides direction for students interested in studying a range of Christian Right issues that expand well beyond the antigay politics of the movement. In her introduction, Burack aptly claims: “Political discourse is a form of pedagogy, and those of us who do not appreciate the complexities of conservative Christian pedagogy will have a more impoverished understanding of American politics than those who do” (p. xix). Through her examination of the movement’s use of rhetoric and messaging, Burack persuasively demonstrates that the Christian Right has

become extraordinarily sophisticated in its messaging, skillfully communicating the same message (albeit with different intent) to religious and secular audiences alike.

Through its attention to the specific dynamics of culture wars over sexuality and gay rights, *Sin, Sex, and Democracy* fills an important gap in the literature investigating the Christian Right. Many scholars, such as Clyde Wilcox, John Green, Ted Jelen, and Laura Olson, have written theoretically and methodologically rigorous and sophisticated books investigating the relationship between religion and politics. Such studies have done much to dispel the stereotypes and myths about the Christian Right by exploring the relationship between religious affiliation and political attitudes and beliefs. Other scholars have investigated the Christian Right's influence on local, state, and national politics. A common thread throughout this literature is the illumination of the diversity of intellectual, theological and political beliefs contained under the banner of the Christian Right. Burack's book makes an important contribution to this rich scholarship.

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