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Cover Page Footnote

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In 1967, Kent Philpott, a student at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, felt a calling to minister in Haight-Ashbury. In this infamous part of San Francisco, Philpott witnessed the dangers of rampant drug use and promiscuous sex. Over the next couple of years, the euphoric Summer of Love, which had received widespread media coverage, turned into something much darker. Pot smoking and acid trips had given way to heroin addiction. Thousands of teenagers and young adults had also moved to, and subsequently overcrowded, parts of San Francisco. Like many of them, Philpott had long hair and carried around his guitar. As a “man of God,” though, Philpott saw an opportunity to save the down-and-out. In addition to the homeless population, the young street minister and seminary student reached out to the area’s prostitutes and drug dealers. Through his work in the streets, Philpott came into contact with another population that he thought required his assistance—homosexuals. From the late 1960s into the early 1980s, Philpott devoted himself to the ex-gay movement, a growing alliance of conservative and religious Americans working to “cure” the nation of homosexuality (see Philpott, 2014). Because of his intensive ministry work and authorship of books, Philpott became a leading force as conservative Americans tried to “redeem” the nation from what they saw as the sinful scourge of same-sex desires. Philpott’s books not only offered a program for supposedly “curing” same-sex desires but also served as important pedagogical texts for others interested in this controversial ministry work.

Philpott was a leader of a religiously-focused social movement centered on “converting” men and women dissatisfied with their same-sex attractions. In the 1960s and 1970s, the supposed threat of homosexuality received intensifying attention from institutional religious bodies. The Southern Baptist Convention, the Catholic Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints not only released statements about the so-called sinfulness of homosexuality but also professed the ability for homosexuals to “convert” to heterosexuality. Philpott’s ministry emerged within a liberalizing sexual culture for lesbians and gay men in the United States’ urban landscape (Allyn, 2000). As a street minister, Philpott noted the changing nature of religion, gender roles, and sexuality in a period of political and social turbulence. Spotlighting Philpott’s beliefs about sexual conversion reveals how the sexual revolution forced conservative Americans to reimagine therapeutic and religious processes for “redeeming” lesbians and gay men.

Importantly, Philpott’s writings served as pedagogical texts that added coherence to a nebulous intellectual and religious movement to “remedy” the nation’s sexually-variant population. Yet, Philpott’s charismatic emphasis, which was popular among American youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s, largely disappeared from the ex-gay movement by the 1980s. Philpott’s ideas about such things as homosexual demonic possession, though important for the transformation of what we now call “conversion therapy,” faded as the “pray the gay away” movement appealed to a burgeoning family values coalition of evangelicals, Mormons, and Catholics (Cooper, 2017; Young, 2015).

Over the past fifty years, conversion therapy has undergone a transformation, particularly as sexual orientation change efforts have grown politically unpopular. Beginning in the 1980s, conversion efforts moved toward gender reparative therapy, a group of counseling practices aimed at aligning one’s gender identity with their birth sex. These ideas, some of which Philpott expressed in his writings, became increasingly controversial by the end of the twentieth century, with the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association issuing strong statements against sexual orientation change efforts in the late 1990s.

By recounting Philpott's influence on the contemporary roots of conversion therapy, though, we can see just how rapidly the discourse surrounding same-sex desires has changed. Most Americans not only disagree with conversion therapy in the present day but cringe at the idea of "curing," "remedying," "converting," and "saving" people with same-sex desires. Even Philpott's use of "homosexual," a term that has largely gone out of use, highlights the progress of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights movement to define sexuality as an identity in need of dignity and equal rights. In order to historicize the struggle for gay rights, however, it is important to understand and analyze how religious conservatives have discussed gendered and sexual variance, and in doing so, we gain a better understanding of the forces that have—and continue to—fight against LGBTQ equality.

Syncretizing Religion and Psychology in the Ex-Gay Movement

Philpott's religious life informed the type of ministry he offered lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Born into a staunch Baptist family, Philpott experienced a religious conversion when he observed the transformative healing potential of the charismatic revival. Beginning in the late 1940s, the charismatic movement stressed the curative powers of the Holy Spirit; the endowment of spiritual gifts; and the role that modern-day miracles play in remedying the afflicted (Kay, 2011; Synan, 1997; Csorda, 1997; Crowe, 1993). By the late 1960s, young people throughout the nation were swept up by charismatic Christianity, with the press derisively calling them "Jesus Freaks" (Harder, Richardson, & Simmonds, 1972). At first, Philpott was skeptical. Although he was a fundamentalist who believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible, Philpott was wary of the power of the Holy Spirit to heal sinners. Philpott's time in the Haight changed his mind, though. There, he saw a range of charismatic practices at work, from the speaking of tongues to

exorcisms of demons from seemingly possessed bodies. These experiences convinced Philpott to become a full-blown “Jesus Freak.”

Philpott’s ministry rested on several religious and spiritual beliefs. Most importantly, he claimed that Satan and his demons were real. In *The Manual of Demonology and the Occult* (1973), Philpott wrote about how he had seen “dozens of satanic incidents and cases of demonic possession” and that with the Bible in mind, he assumed “the reality of Satan and demons” (p. 11-12), both in the Haight and in the world more generally. Philpott did not need scientific proof that demons existed to believe in them. He contended that the Bible presented Satan as real (p. 20). He also relayed how his conclusions concerning the demonic were based on a simple, literal interpretation of biblical materials (p. 28). From this reading of the Bible, Philpott deduced that demons “confuse and deceive believers doctrinally, thus perverting or frustrating the intent of God” (p. 71). Significantly, Philpott argued that it was not always easy to recognize the distinction between the diseased and the demoniac. Over the course of his street ministry, however, he grew confident that Satan’s demons were working in the Haight and part of this demonic mission involved projecting new personalities into the sexually-variant.

Several other parts of Philpott’s life were important for the charismatic ministry of sexual variance. In *Memoirs of a Jesus Freak* (2014), Philpott remembered how people in the Haight, purportedly sick of a life of homosexuality, wanted to find God. These men and women had flocked to San Francisco to realize a new life—to start anew and hopefully fit in. Homosocial bonding, sex, and drugs were not cure-alls and some people developed a need for something more. To meet this need, Philpott (2014) expanded his ministry efforts to accommodate newly born-again youth who wanted out of the “hell hole” of Haight-Ashbury “but had nowhere to go” (p. 74). To help these young men and women, Philpott signed leases for a number of houses.

Highlighting the importance of the counterculture to exercise its influence in unexpected ways, these houses operated similarly to hippie communes, though without the drug and alcohol use. These residential ministries grew, with people living and worshipping together. Brick-and-mortar locations provided legitimacy to Philpott's ministry efforts to self-described homosexuals, and as the number of affiliated houses grew, Philpott also acknowledged how his undergraduate studies in psychology aided those in need. He was in a unique position to draw from psychological understandings of sexual development and employ a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. The melding of the supposedly secular world of psychology made sense to the sacred nature of Philpott's street-based and residential ministry.

Philpott's undergraduate psychology coursework helped him secure a position at the Marin County Counseling Center, where he was available to meet with clients and further spread his ideas about demons and same-sex desires. Significantly, Philpott's work at the Marin County Counseling Center was the beginning of Love in Action (LIA), the best known ex-gay ministry in the nation. LIA began when Philpott's counseling job brought him in contact with three homosexual men in the same week. (Philpott later interpreted this as a sign from God.) Each of the men were "quite conflicted about the contradictions between what the Bible said [about homosexuality] and their behavior" (Philpott, 1975, p. 84-85). One of the men was Frank Worthen, a wealthy businessman in his forties. Worthen had already started ministering to lesbians and gay men by the time he met Philpott. Worthen's primary outreach method involved mailing his testimony, which he had recorded on cassette tapes, to others with same-sex desires. He placed an ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* to market his testimony. Known as Brother Frank's Ministry, Worthen's tapes shared his lived experience and spoke about his desire to change (Erzen, 2006). He had not yet experienced a complete "transition" to heterosexuality, but

Worthen expressed hope for the future. Soon, Philpott and Worthen became good friends and leaders of LIA.

LIA began as a weekly meeting between Philpott, Worthen, and the other men who had come into the Marin County Counseling Center for help. These early meetings had a simple structure. The four men met to “discuss issues, pray, and lend mutual support and encouragement” (Philpott, 2014, p. 85). After a few weeks, one of the men—an artist—said that he knew three women who wanted to join the group. “They did,” Philpott recounted, “and after two or three meetings of the six self-described homosexuals and me, we decided to open it up to others” (p. 85). One of the female newcomers thought it would be a good idea for the group to have a proper name. She already had one in mind: Love in Action, based on 1 John 3. In this chapter of the New Testament, the followers of Jesus are asked “not to love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (as cited in Philpott, 2014, p. 85). For LIA, truth involved the belief that the Bible condemned homosexual sex acts, but that the sinner could be saved from his or her past. By undergoing a religious and sexual rebirth, Philpott, Worthen, and other LIA members contended that sexually-variant individuals could be redeemed by God and find a place in Heaven.

Philpott’s ministry continued to shape his thoughts on religion and sexuality, and in *The Third Sex?* he outlined his biblically-based understanding of human sexuality. Philpott (1975), for example, wrote that “there is no such thing as a bisexual or a homosexual according to God’s established order” (p. 172). The only authentic—and godly—sexual identity, in other words, was being heterosexual. This idea not only refuted multiple psychoanalytic theories of constitutional bisexuality but would, in the near future, become a prominent belief in the ex-gay movement. At the same time, however, Philpott borrowed from his psychological training to challenge gay

activists' claims about sexuality. He wrote that he strongly leaned “toward the concept that a person becomes a homosexual: they are made, not born. If they were born that way there would be no hope, but we know there is hope” (Philpott, 1975, p. 184). This statement demonstrated Philpott's belief that environmental factors were paramount for psychosexual development, though humans were not always in control of their environment.

Philpott's understanding of the environment, even when acknowledging psychological theories, included references to the evil found in the Bible. Satan, he contended, “can influence people in terms of temptation—opportunities for sin—and can work chaos and fear into any human situation.” Put differently, the Devil could not force homosexuality on anyone, but Philpott (1975) argued that demons were “alive and well on Planet Earth” and created the environmental conditions for same-sex desires to thrive (p. 184-185). Through the work of Satan's demons, Philpott argued that homosexuality had become a scourge on the nation's urban landscape, particularly in places like San Francisco.

Philpott's focus on Satan and demonic influences were joined by a faith in interrogating his counselees' earliest memories. Here, he took a page from orthodox psychiatry's focus on the etiology of mental illness (Shorter, 1997; Harrington, 2019). When thinking through issues of psychosexual development, Philpott considered his own experience as a young boy. These reflections connected gender development and sexual desires. Philpott remembered how he had never felt confused about his gender, as his parents made sure to let him know that he had been born a boy. By the mid-1970s, Philpott (1975) learned from his homosexual counselees that this had not been the case for them, insisting that their “early family relations are most often distorted” (p. 192). According to Philpott, this caused little boys and girls to become confused about their gender identities.

Philpott declared that each homosexual was damaged during their formative years and that this psychosocial damage contributed to same-sex sexual object choice. He emphasized that there was an element of choice involved when it came to acting on same-sex attractions. Patient prodding about the formative years remained necessary to have therapeutic breakthroughs since this was the place where emotional, gendered, and sexual reconciliations took place. Philpott stressed the reaffirmation—or even the first-time installation—of a gender identity that aligned with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. In order for this to happen, though, counselors needed to understand the root cause of their patients’ problems. Only then could therapeutic progress occur. Or, as Philpott (1975) argued, “old, sick patterns must be exposed so that the homosexual may be free of distorted pasts, and better able to come to grips with a new life” (p. 192).

Fundamentalism and Gender Roles

In addition to relaying the lived experiences of men and women struggling with same-sex desires, *The Third Sex?* also served a pedagogical role: it told of the “best practices” for counseling the sexually and gendered variant. Biblical fundamentalism was crucial for the purported “treatment” of homosexual counselees. Philpott (1975) specifically underscored how counselors “must be firm with an unwavering commitment to the Scriptures” and “carefully examine Bible passages concerning homosexuality with the homosexual” (p. 188-189). He also warned that the Bible might become a battleground over meaning, especially since gay-affirming churches like the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) had been gaining traction in recent years (White, 2015). To combat messages from pro-gay theologians and ministers, Philpott advised counselors to avoid a middle course on the issue of homosexuality in the Bible. He contended that this hardline view facilitated an opportunity for counselees to find freedom from

same-sex desires. Before this could happen, Philpott warned that all of this would be hard work, as the counselor was asking “the homosexual to die.” Indeed, figurative death was essential for a religious and sexual rebirth. Death had to happen for homosexuals and they had to, in Philpott’s (1975) words, “die to that which has meant more to him than anything else—sex.” “He must really die to follow Jesus,” the street minister reiterated (p. 188-189). In such declarations, Philpott emphasized how sexual behavior defined his view of homosexuality and he stressed the ways that gay liberation activists posited sexuality as a core aspect of identity. To help facilitate the homosexual’s death, however, Philpott advised counselors to: 1) understand this part of the patient; 2) identify the root causes of their supposedly sick pattern; and 3) assist in the healing process. Philpott’s insights into the counselor-patient relationship were not new; rather, they highlighted how the ex-gay movement was beginning to borrow from psychiatric thought on fostering heterosexual development.

The Third Sex? functioned as a teaching manual for conversion therapists in other ways as well. For one, Philpott (1975) suggested certain interpersonal and gendered dynamics for counseling men and women with same-sex desires. He insisted that “a counselor can offer godly love to homosexuals of either sex,” indicating how he preferred to hold hands at the beginning of each prayer session (p. 195-196). Although male and female counselors could help “homosexuals of either sex” at the beginning of the counseling process, Philpott believed that men would have better long-term results with both lesbians and gay men. This reflected an underlying belief in the importance of masculine authority. “It is my understanding,” he wrote, “that it is very difficult, perhaps even unhealthy, for a woman to counsel a male homosexual” (p. 183). Philpott observed how women counselors could even prevent the sexual conversion process from taking place. Citing no clinical studies by professionals, only what he had heard

from a limited number of self-described homosexual men, he argued that “the male homosexual has difficulty relating to women” and that “it would be extremely hard for a man to approach a woman counselor in the first place.” Furthermore, Philpott contended that men were supposed to lead, not follow, women: “It is not appropriate (or in good order) for a woman to be guiding a man into assuming his God-given role” (p. 195-196). Women counselors might help at first, but at some point, men needed to lead.

In these statements, Philpott advocated for a natural gendered order where masculinity literally set homosexual men and women straight. This was, as Philpott emphasized, what God wanted not only for lesbians and gay men but also for the sexes. It was a clear critique of the second-wave feminist argument that women should not only have the franchise, which was the primary goal of first-wave feminism in the early twentieth century, but also be viewed as equals with men in matters of law, work, family, and sexuality (Horowitz, 1998).

Conclusion

Philpott’s writings served as important inspiration for the religious and intellectual world of the ex-gay movement. *The Third Sex?* sold out and a second edition further spread Philpott’s views on counseling the sexually variant. In the mid-to-late 1970s, ex-gay ministries proliferated throughout the nation, from the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles to New York and Boston. Philpott’s writings helped these ministries understand the work they did. Despite being a key figure at the start of the ex-gay movement, however, Philpott recognized his limitations. He believed that ex-gays knew more about counseling self-described homosexuals than he ever could. Much like other members of the ex-gay movement, Philpott also became embroiled in scandal when, in 1981, he faced accusations of sexual impropriety with his own adopted daughter. Erzen (2006) wrote “After a great deal of wrangling, Philpott reluctantly relinquished

directorship of LIA to Frank [Worthen]" (p. 31). Philpott was an early voice for ex-gay ministering, but by the early 1980s, others were ready to step up. These various stakeholders, many of whom had participated in the so-called gay "lifestyle," organized the ex-gay movement into something more socially and politically intelligible (Erzen, 2006; Gerber, 2012).

In the process of expanding the ex-gay movement, ministers and pastoral counselors discounted many of the charismatic beliefs that motivated Philpott's work. In 1976, for instance, the first national ex-gay conference began the transitional work that moved religious-based sexual reorientation away from these charismatic roots. Organizers invited Dr. Walker Martin, the author of *Kingdom of Cults* (1966), to speak at the first meeting of what became Exodus International, a nonprofit umbrella group for ministers, pastoral counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists who "treated" same-sex desires (Gengle, 1977). In his book, which sold over half a million copies by 1989, Martin took aim at divine healing practices, stressing how these practices had been de-emphasized by mainstream Christianity over time. This was a direct attack on charismatic Christians and Exodus' founders were intent on distancing themselves from so-called cults as they tried to increase their appeal to other conservative Americans. In order to fold sexual reorientation change therapists and counselors into the emerging family values political coalition, the ex-gay movement mostly abandoned the charismatic influences that Philpott wrote about in *The Manual of Demonology and the Occult* and *The Third Sex?* There was simply little room in family values conservatism for miracle cures, demonic possession, and glossolalia (Worthen, 2014; Dowland, 2015; Johnson, 2019).

Though most of the ex-gay movement moved away from charismatic healing practices, Philpott's contributions to conversion therapy cannot be taken-for-granted. In syncretizing the secular and the sacred, Philpott offered a training manual for a range of conversion therapists to

think about—and to try to “cure”—their counselees’ same-sex desires. Philpott’s ministry in the Haight also forces us to reconsider dominant narratives about the entwined nature of the New Christian Right and the fight for gay equality. More specifically, Philpott’s ministry to self-described homosexuals began several years before the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality *per se* from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (Bayer, 1981), thus challenging interpretations of the ex-gay movement as a reaction to that specific medical and diagnostic change. Last, Philpott’s efforts to “cure” homosexuality highlighted the increasing importance of a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, particularly regarding normative gender roles, for the ex-gay movement.

The religious rationalizations for conversion therapy apparent in Philpott’s ministry efforts have continued to animate the ex-gay movement since. Nicolosi and Byrd (2000), both of whom practiced gender reparative therapy, published the results of a survey on conversion therapy patients, revealing that religious motivations were high on the list of reasons that individuals sought “treatment” for their same-sex desires. The next year, Robert Spitzer, a Columbia University psychiatrist, reported a similar finding in a controversial study on the ex-gay movement (Drescher and Zucker, 2003). More recently, conversion therapists have challenged local and state bans on sexual orientation change efforts with minors by insisting that these bans violent the First Amendment’s free exercise clause. In doing so, they have underscored the conservative religious beliefs that Philpott emphasized throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s.

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