

## **The New Moral Vocabulary**

or, How to Win a Debate Without Ever Actually Saying Anything At All

by Craig Smith

Recently in my home state of Colorado, a man was charged with a hate-crime for killing a trans-sexual. On the surface this sounds like an obvious example of a hate-crime, but the reality is a bit murkier. See, what happened was the man thought the trans-sexual was a woman. So they were getting...ah, how shall we put this...intimate, when the truth became obvious. Reacting in disgust and anger, the man beat the trans-sexual so badly that he/she (??) died. Now, obviously, this was horrible and morally wrong in every way. But was it a hate-crime? I mean, the murdered hadn't sought this trans-sexual out and targeted her/him for violence because of the trans-sexual issue. It was a spur of the moment thing brought on by a great shock. The man was disgusted and enraged. He lost control and committed a terrible crime. He must be charged with murder and, if guilty, punished accordingly. Certainly killing a trans-sexual for any reason cannot entail a lesser penalty than killing anyone else, but should it entail a *greater* one? The law stipulates a greater penalty for hate-crimes (crimes motivated in whole or in part by a bias against the victim's perceived race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability) but regardless of questions about whether such stipulations are even ethical<sup>1</sup>, the question remains: was this a hate crime?

I have been listening to media reports about recent developments in the politics of homosexuality with great interest. I should say at the outset that this is not a particularly hot topic for me. I believe that the Bible is clear that homosexuality is wrong and, as such, should not be advanced via legal means. However, I also believe that homosexuality is probably no *more* wrong than any other sin and therefore the animosity many feel towards homosexuals troubles me. I suspect that much of the animosity directed towards homosexuality is due largely to the fact that many are personally repulsed by it rather than being genuinely morally concerned. In any event, this is simply not a hot topic for me.

But as I said, I have been listening to the ongoing national conversation about this issue with great interest. Why? Because of the way this conversation is being carried out.

It seems to me that those who wish to sanction homosexuality via legal action have hit on a rather brilliant strategy. Unfortunately, it is a strategy that those of us on the other side of the fence have been slow to recognize. This has to change. We have to wake up. What is at stake here is far more significant than the single issue of homosexual "rights" in America. What is at stake here is our very ability to engage in moral discourse; that is, in conversations about what is right and good and true.

What is this strategy? Simply put, it is this: redefine the terms so that those who disagree with you can no longer participate in to the conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> My concern is this: there are already laws which stipulate penalties for criminal behavior. Therefore, hate-crime laws are punishing the *motivation* for the behavior. In effect, then, hate-crime laws are laws against *thinking* a certain way and as morally reprehensible as some of the thoughts might be, this seems like dangerous territory.

Example number one: tolerance. Once upon a time, tolerance meant something like “fairness toward the people who hold different views.”<sup>2</sup> Or, even more interestingly, “the act of putting up with somebody or something irritating or otherwise unpleasant.”<sup>3</sup> I really like that last one, because it gets at the heart of tolerance in the way it has always been understood by English speakers. Traditionally, tolerance has meant treating people respectfully in spite of the fact that they don’t believe what you believe and in spite of the fact that their beliefs may actually be irritating or unpleasant to you. In the New Moral Vocabulary, however, tolerance has come to mean “the acceptance of all beliefs as equally true and/or good.” Consequently, anyone who says something like “homosexuality is wrong” is intolerant, regardless of how well that person might actually treat any homosexuals they happen to encounter.

But of course the authors of the New Moral Vocabulary want this to be a one-way street. See, those of us who think that all moral beliefs are *not* equally right disagree with those who think that all moral beliefs *are* equally right. This presents the latter group with a problem. If they say that the not-all-moral-positions-are-right group is wrong, then they are both intolerant (because they don’t accept our position as being equally valid which is the new definition of intolerance) and ridiculous (because you can’t say someone is wrong if all beliefs are equally right). This is patently absurd, yet this new definition of intolerance seems to have become a staple in contemporary moral discourse.

Example number two: hate. Now this one is really fascinating. It used to be that hatred involved a sense of hostility which in turn implies a level of aggression. Thus to hate someone was to desire to do them harm. As I listen to the conversation today, however, people are using the word “hate” as though it were a synonym for “believe is wrong.” For instance, listening to NPR I often hear the phrase “hate speech” to describe speech which does not promote violence or aggression but merely questions the moral validity of particular beliefs. Of course, if that questioning is followed up with encouragements to do physical harm to those who hold the beliefs or to deny them basic human rights, I would agree that we have an example of “hate speech”. But if no such encouragement is present, how can such questioning be hateful? Answer: by changing the definition of hatred.

Somehow, the definition of hate has gotten so twisted around that a basic human right – i.e. the right to speak freely about what one believes – has become an act of hatred. This is a slippery slope. If it is intolerant to believe that a person’s belief is wrong, then any speech which causes people to question the validity of someone else’s belief is “hate speech.” And, in point of fact, Christians in Sweden, England, Canada and the United States have already been prosecuted under “hate crime” laws for expressing personal disapproval of homosexual behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Here’s the brilliance of the whole thing: once the vocabulary is redefined, the debate is already over. I mean, really, who wants to be an intolerant promoter of hatred? Not me! But unless I’m willing to be cast in precisely this light, I cannot say what I believe: that not all beliefs are equally valid and not all beliefs are equally good. In regards to the homosexuality issue, simply expressing what I believe – i.e. that homosexuality is morally wrong – makes me both intolerant

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<sup>2</sup> The New American Dictionary.

<sup>3</sup> Another entry under “Tolerance” in the New American Dictionary.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Sprigg, *In Focus*, Family Research Council, <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=IF07C02>.

and a promoter of hatred because it might cause others to question whether homosexuality is acceptable.

The interesting thing is that if anyone had said “only hate-filled people think that homosexuality is wrong” they would have been ignored. Actually, they probably would have been laughed at. I mean, it’s ridiculous, isn’t it? You’re hate-filled because you don’t believe that homosexuality is right? What could be more absurd? But isn’t that precisely what the New Moral Vocabulary has forced upon us? Simply believing that homosexuality is wrong makes you intolerant and daring to say that belief out loud to someone else makes you a promoter of hatred.

Let’s be clear about this: to be intolerant and hateful, you don’t have to be attacking homosexuals either physically or verbally. You don’t have to be out campaigning against them. You don’t have to be denying them basic human rights or dismissing them from jobs. In fact, you could do the opposite: you could defend a homosexual who was being attacked, get them medical care for their injuries and a job with health insurance to cover the medical expenses associated with their recovery...but say out loud that you believe homosexuality is morally wrong and you are guilty of intolerance and hate speech.

If you carry this sort of thing to its logical conclusion, it’s obviously absurd. So why is this going on? Ostensibly, it’s to protect people from being harmed by those who don’t agree with their beliefs. In other words, to put a stop to hate crime. But how great is this need? What I mean is, how much hate crime is actually being perpetrated? According to the FBI statistics, the answer is: not much. In 2007, the FBI reported 1,408,337 violent crimes and 9,843,481 property crimes in the U.S. That makes a total of 11,251,818 crimes. For the same year, the FBI reported 7,624 hate-crimes. Do the math. This means that less than .07% of all crimes in 2007 fit the relatively loose definition of “hate crimes”. I’m not saying that it never happens, because of course it does. But is it so common that it necessitates a radical reworking of the English language? I think not.

This issue, of course, touches on far more than just the homosexual issue. This New Moral Vocabulary affects our discussion of religious beliefs, the abortion debate, stem cell research, et.al. Make no mistake about it: he who gets to define the vocabulary gets to dominate the debate. Something as seemingly innocuous as the way we use these words may end up having a tremendous impact on the future of our culture and the place that the Christian faith has in it.

So what can we do? Let me suggest three things:

1. Speak the truth boldly, in contexts where such speech is appropriate. What I mean is, if the issue of homosexuality comes up, explain clearly and without apology what you think and why. But don’t be so anxious to do this that you interject such statements into conversations where they aren’t appropriate. Don’t go looking to *create* an opportunity to say what you think about homosexuality.
2. Refuse to participate in *real* hate speech; that is, in speech that belittles, insults or dismisses the intrinsic worth and value of any human being because of what they believe or how they act. The Bible is very clear: all human beings are made as the Image of

God. There is not a single statement in the Bible which suggests that sin has changed this reality. We are all the Image of God because that is what God made us to be. Of course, sin has radically affected the degree to which we do what we were made to do, but it has not changed what we are. Therefore we cannot demean another human being no matter how much we may disagree with their beliefs and behaviors.

3. Ask people to define their terms. When someone talks about “intolerance” or “hatred”, ask for a clear definition. If they define such terms according to the New Moral Vocabulary, engage them in a discussion about the original meaning of those words and the logical inconsistencies inherent in the ways they are being used today. There are lots of opportunities for this sort of very cordial conversation. The New Moral Vocabulary is finding its way onto talk radio, school curriculum and everyday speech. So be ready to call-in to your favorite radio station when the issue comes up. Be ready to schedule a parent-teacher conference to clarify definitions. Be ready to have this conversation with people you’re sitting next to on a plane or in the coffee-shop.

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