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## Progress Report 2006

### FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY

## A Civil Rights Movement Getting Religion

BY RABBI SHARON KLEINBAUM



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Since 2004, the movement has gotten religion. Of course, as individuals, many of us were already religious. And there have been queer religious communities all along.

But the movement as such was uncomfortable dealing directly with religion. Religious queer communities were not seen as central to the movement. Our leaders were not invited to leadership meetings and our members were seen as peripheral to the movement unless they had other affiliations. Nevertheless, there were many queer religious leaders such as Troy Perry, who founded the Metropolitan Community Church, for whom religion was a positive force for gay liberation.

The 2004 election was a wake-up call. The Human Rights Campaign launched its Religion and Faith program with Harry Knox as its first director. The Empire State Pride Agenda's Pride in the Pulpit interfaith network, which Alan Van Capelle started, grew dramatically under the leadership of Chris Cormier.

The National Religious Leadership Roundtable of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force pioneered these kinds of programs. Urvashi Vaid, the former NGLTF executive director, founded the Roundtable in 1998 when she saw how religious leaders in the movement could engage the anti-gay religious right on its own moral and doctrinal turf, while secular arguments missed the point. I am proud to say that I was a founding member of the Roundtable.

The biggest issue for gay rights in America today is who gets to say what is religious and what is moral. I believe that people have a right to beliefs that are opposed to mine. But they don't have the right to codify their bigotry into civil law.

For example, the Catholic Church forbids both divorce and subsequent remarriage for the divorced, but lacks the power to decide on civil marriage licenses. The laws in most of the country still say that that two people of the same gender cannot get married, but

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two people who have been divorced can. Can we imagine what would happen if the Catholic Church demanded that the civil law of this country refuse to recognize remarriage after divorce?

The religious right constantly seeks to expand in ways that give legal force to its own reactionary theology. Their anti-gay campaign is part and parcel of this effort. In this, they are no different from the religious right that wants Israel to be a Jewish theocracy, or the religious right that established an Islamic theocracy in Iran.

A year ago I picked up The New York Times and saw on the front page a photograph and article featuring six major leaders of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, who had gathered in Jerusalem to protest plans to hold World Pride there. These six men are otherwise barely on speaking terms with each other. What brought them together was their hatred of gay people. However extreme their other differences, on this they are united in bigotry.

As the North American co-chair of World Pride 2006, I am immensely proud of the efforts of those who are undertaking to show the world a Jerusalem which is open and loving rather than these clerics' Jerusalem of violence and bigotry. Gay and lesbian people are saying we are equal partners in religious communities, and in a world in which each and every one of us is created in God's image. In these times of intolerance and suspicion, we are going to Jerusalem to proclaim that tolerance is holy and Jerusalem belongs to all of us.

What the movement is now learning is that religion per se is not the enemy. Like it or not, America is a profoundly religious society. But the American religious right has totally hijacked the language of religion and spirituality to promote the values of its reactionary political agenda. The enemy is not religion but their bigotry and divisiveness.

We are learning that if we are going to go on building on our successes so far, and not have to retreat from them, we must learn to confront our right-wing religious opponents on their home ground.

And this is so much more than a strategy. Trying to find meaning is what religion is all about. The deeper questions that religion asks are important. There are deep truths to be learned from every community, but the way to learn the most is to know and be proud of our own traditions and their relevance today.

As a rabbi and a gay rights activist, I often think of the experience of the Jews and their 40 years in the wilderness after escaping from Egypt. The post-Stonewall gay rights movement is pushing 40 itself: this Gay Pride we will celebrate Stonewall's 37th anniversary. We are freer now than then, but we still have a long way to go. The first generation of the flight from Egypt didn't make it to the Promised Land, and neither did Moses. Neither did Martin Luther King, and we probably won't either. Nevertheless, a life worth living is working to further ourselves along that course.

*Sharon Kleinbaum is the senior rabbi at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, New York City's synagogue for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Jews, their families, and their friends.*

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