

Matters of Poor Choice
ABC's Mixed Messages About Gay People
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Twice delayed by world events of greater newsworthiness, "A Matter of Choice?" ABC News' much-ballyhooed, five-part "Nightline" series on gay life in America finally flickered across late night TV screens last week. It was the latest in a series of long-standing broadcast news division "breakthrough" programs on homosexuality that date back to Mike Wallace's shadowed 60's interviewees on CBS Reports.

Four of the five nights were shot before September 11 last year. In those segments Ted Koppel took us to a gay senior citizens retirement village, recounted the fatally violent shooting in a Roanoke tavern, shared the story of a gay district attorney who had to prosecute Virginia's sodomy laws and did the seemingly almost mandatory "gay youth kicked out of the house by good Christian parents" piece. The final night featured a recently-held town hall meeting on gay issues.

It is especially ironic that terrorist acts by religious extremists in America and Israel had postponed a series permeated with personal tales of terrors perpetrated by home town religious extremists. Even more ironic, the town hall meeting's tenor further confirmed more than ever that 9/11 has done little the change evangelical Christian America's psyche on the "homosexual question".

When the program was first announced over nine months ago, queer media watchers were upset over the series' title. The overwhelming majority of gay people believe in their genetically predisposed nature as strongly as fundamentalist believe the opposite.

The title suggested "Nightline's" producers had picked the theoretical enemy camp as home base. After seeing the specials, my opinion is that they likely were in a virtual Winnebago nearby. However, the mixed messages the series sent about gay people probably did no more harm than good. More important was the irony and unintentional humor that clung like a haze to the series throughout its duration.

The senior citizens segment apparently intended to show that all gay folk aren't young, club-going gym rats on the prowl. The closest thing to a rave was a classic, party hats and sheet cake, nursing-home style birthday party for an 83 year old resident.

But the segment also helped perpetuate the myth of gay wealth. Watching the residents, almost all of whom came out late in life after making their personal fortunes masquerading as straight, reminded me of the community fundraisers held a few years back to keep Mattachine Society founder Harry Hayes and his lover, fellow gay civil rights pioneer Don Bachardy, from having to eat dog food like other impoverished seniors. My guess is that these folks never heard of either of them. Ah, Marie Antoinette's "let them eat cake" still has the power to sting.

Mixing the crotchety and the long-closeted the segment also revealed that, to a wrinkled sissy and sagging dyke, the old queer folks didn't cotton to those "nekkid boys and girls" flaunting it all in the pride parades. These views were expressed immediately after those same seniors' woeful tales of years of internal struggle and feelings that they "were the only ones out there." Instant Alzheimer's.

The following nights contained additional coming out stories heavily intermixed with the fundamentalists' latest "scientific" spin on sexuality. We're all sexual tabla razas at birth a Baptist church organist claimed, his nearly B-52 bouffanted wife at his side, nodding in dutiful support. Only exposure to gay people makes you gay, he claimed as he seemingly struggled to admit that he could have gone either way.

He also claimed he was going to "take a lot of heat" for sharing his views publicly. From who? The scientists who have demonstrated repeatedly that the more you are conflicted about your masculinity, the more homophobic you are? Or those who rail against the stereotypical searches for lesbians on the softball field and gay men at the organ in the choir loft?

The town hall meeting contained more unintentional humor. One woman honestly asked how she could continue hating homosexuals without being called a bigot. Ya can't, Blanche, ya can't.

Over and over Koppel kept suggesting that the meeting "needed to get beyond religious debate." How wrong he was. The "homosexual question" is nothing more than a religious debate. We're just asking the wrong questions.

When another woman stood up and dead-panned "I believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible" Koppel should have shot back "I believe that if I drink milk after the expiration date on the bottle, monkeys will shoot out of my ass." Both opinions are equal in their validity. The problem in America today is that one viewpoint allows the holder the cachet to throw their own children out of their homes, fire their employees in nearly forty states, and even murder people because by some Cosmic Giggle their last name had changed from meaning happy to meaning homosexual. The other viewpoint would result in a three day observational stay at a nearby mental institution.

The reality is that for the last century and a half, a religiously-based political movement has consistently sought to deny people their civil rights. From freeing the slaves and the emancipation of women to school desegregation and interracial marriage, this political movement has used a much rewritten, much translated book of a 5,000 year-old oral tradition as its sole argument. Gay folk are only the latest, and hopefully final victims in this battle.

The only way to defeat these forces is to start asking the real questions about the spiritual disease that lurks behind these symptomatic battles. Questions desperately need to be asked about the nature of religious belief, all of which is ultimately motivated by a consciously aware species' dread of its own mortality.

At the end of the town hall meeting, Koppel asked for a show of hands from the Christians in the audience who might have opened their minds just a teeny bit on the “homosexual question.” None shot up. For good reason. Until “Nightline” and similar programs do a whole bunch of series in effect entitled “Religious Conviction: A Matter of Choice?” will Americans will stop merely believing and start genuinely thinking.