

July 22, 2008

Dear Professor Liechty,

I have just come across your response to an article I wrote for *Sightings* a few months back, and I wanted to write to thank you for such a thoughtful reading. I am at the candidate level and have only a few things in print – yours may be the first response I've received that was a genuine engagement with something I wrote, which is both daunting and flattering.

Though I feel misrepresented in a few places, for the most part your careful essay highlights genuine differences of perspective. I object to your characterization of my “reprehensible rhetorical device” connecting sex abuse and deliberate isolation. I obviously agree that “there is no necessary connection between sex abuse and cultivating a minority way of life and sensibility”; those do appear to be connected in the FLDS case, though. There was no conscious rhetorical strategy there to connect communities who choose to isolate themselves with sexual abuse: I was just noting two characteristics of the FLDS compound that, combined, I felt compelled careful criticism. Throughout your response, you make distinctions about this case – if it involves sexual abuse of children – necessitating intervention, but I feel that you denied me those same distinctions, to the extent that by the end you have me “looking for greater intervention in the lives of minority communities.” The piece was meant to argue that we as a culture should look hard at *this* case and *these* people, overcoming what I would characterize as a blithe concession to minority rights which makes us reluctant to judge even the most criminal behavior. It should be apparent that such an argument could only be made from the standpoint of one who makes that concession and feels that reluctance.

That said, I frankly admit that I have trouble indulging the question of “whose hopes and options?” when it concerns community mores forcibly limiting the education of children and marrying girls off at a young age. At the end of the day I do, actually, think that limiting a child's education is a form of abuse. This judgment may entail “blithe majoritarian confidence” in what sort of education is worthwhile – that of the farm or of the classroom – but at its source it's a judgment about horizons and expectations: members of minority communities should be encouraged in whatever life they choose, but they should be equipped with the sense of place and perspective to actually make a choice rather than follow a narrow path determined for them by others. Perhaps there is where we simply differ: you beautifully point out the immense dilemmas created by the fact that there is no “way of raising children that does not both shape and limit” and “make possible hopes and options otherwise unavailable.” I don't have any answers for such dilemmas, except to say that the “faster, more far-reaching, and guilt-free interventions” you accuse me of seeking aren't among them. The *Sightings* piece was meant only to suggest that it's possible to confront those questions with an open mind and yet retain commitments that some may label “majoritarian.” Balancing those commitments with policy – identifying as you say the “principles and practices [that] will protect the right of the Amish to be different, even to have different hopes and options” – is an essential, dangerous, ongoing process, and the conversations of academics are just a small part of it.

At any rate – again, thank you for such a thoughtful reading. Did you happen to see the *Sightings* that ran a couple of weeks after mine on the Texas case? Taking a more legalistic

view, its author uses the “argument from moral repugnance” to condemn polygamous communities altogether, which I found, frankly, rather shocking: http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2008/0515.shtml.

Best of luck with your new journal!

Best,
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