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## Moral Relativism–Republican Style

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At the Davenport rally, the vice president, responding to a question about homosexual marriage, stated that “freedom means freedom for everyone,” including the freedom to “enter any kind of relationship they want to.” Mr. Cheney then went on to declare that his position on the issue had remained unchanged since the 2000 Presidential campaign, when he had stated a similar position in his debate with Democratic vice presidential nominee Senator Joseph Lieberman.

“The question that comes up with respect to the issue of marriage,” Cheney argued, “is what kind of official sanction or approval is going to be granted by government, if you will, to particular relationships. Historically, that’s been a relationship that has been handled by the states. The states have made that fundamental decision in terms of defining what constitutes a marriage.”

Cheney’s comments caught observers by surprise, raising the issue of a potential split in the Bush administration on an issue of intense public controversy. On virtually every other issue, controversial or otherwise, the vice president has stood in absolute agreement with the president. The administration has sent no mixed signals on issues of public policy and political strategy. Thus, Cheney’s apparent departure from the administration’s policy on support for a Federal Marriage Amendment landed like a bombshell among pro-marriage leaders.

While it is true that Cheney had stated a similar position in his 2000 debate with Senator Lieberman, his reiteration of that stance—along with considerable elaboration—raises the stakes considerably. When the vice president states now that same-sex marriage is “appropriately a matter for the states to decide, that’s how it ought to best be handled,” the administration opens itself to criticisms ranging from public manipulation to political and moral schizophrenia.

It should be noted that the vice president did finally defer to the president’s support for the Federal Marriage Amendment. Mr. Cheney explained that the president “as a result of the decisions that have been made in Massachusetts this year by judges,” decided that support for a constitutional amendment was necessary in order to define marriage at the federal level. In an extremely convoluted sentence, the vice president appeared to argue that the president’s position was perfectly reasonable, but that he nevertheless disagreed with the president’s assessment. Adding further confusion to the mix, the vice president concluded his response with this explanation: “So where we’re at, at this point, is he has come out in support of a federal constitutional amendment. And I don’t think—well, so far it hasn’t had the votes to pass. Most states have addressed this. There is on the books the federal statute Defense of Marriage Act passed in 1996. And to date it has not been successfully challenged in the courts, and that may be sufficient to resolve the issue.”

In other words, the vice president performed an interesting acrobatic act all over the issue of same-sex marriage while appearing alternately to disagree and then to agree and then to disagree again with the administration’s public

pronouncements. Acknowledging the reality of activist judges poised to invalidate laws protecting marriage, Mr. Cheney concluded his statement by arguing that the Defense of Marriage Act “may be sufficient to resolve the issue.” Referring to the Federal Marriage Amendment, the vice president attempted to regain ground by stating support for the president’s call for a Federal Marriage Amendment, but then appeared to observe that the measure would lack the votes necessary to pass.

At the very time Mr. Cheney made his remarks, a draft version of the 2004 Republican platform was in circulation. That draft threw the administration’s full support behind a Federal Marriage Amendment, noting: “Attempts to redefine marriage in a single city or state could have serious consequences throughout the country, and anything less than a constitutional amendment, passed by Congress and ratified by the states, is vulnerable to being over-turned by activist judges.”

In the immediate aftermath of Cheney’s remarks, pro-marriage advocates pushed for a strengthening of the platform’s language, leading to the incorporation of statements opposed to legal arrangements known as “civil unions” and pushing for Congress to adopt legislation stripping the federal courts of authority to overturn laws protecting heterosexual marriage.

Was the vice president really breaking with the administration on such a fundamental issue? Advocates on both sides of the same-sex marriage issue responded quickly to Mr. Cheney’s comments, with some greeting his statement as an opening for diversity in the administration, and others accusing the vice president of something just short of treason.

In response to the furor, Anne Womack, the vice president’s campaign press secretary, insisted that Mr. Cheney’s position is not new. As she told *The New York Times*, “that’s been his position for the past four years; his position has been completely consistent. The idea that he broke new ground or broke with the president today, people are just ignoring the reality of his statements over the past three and a half years.” The vice president insisted he was speaking personally, not for the administration. “The president makes basic policy for the administration,” he insisted. “And, he’s made it clear that he does, in fact, support a constitutional amendment on this issue.”

What is behind the vice president’s comments? Mr. Cheney answered that question in his very first words to the audience in Iowa. “Well, the question has come up obviously in the past with respect to the question of gay marriage. Lynne and I have a gay daughter, so it’s an issue that our family is very familiar with. We have two daughters, and we have enormous pride in both of them. They’re both fine young women. They do a superb job, frankly, of supporting us. And we are blessed with both our daughters.”

That statement explains everything that followed. Mr. Cheney’s convoluted, confusing, and compromised position on same-sex marriage is, he publicly acknowledged, rooted in the fact that he and his wife have a gay daughter.

Mary Cheney, the Cheney’s younger daughter, serves as Director of Vice Presidential Operations for the Bush campaign. A well-known lesbian activist, she had formerly served as an executive for the Coors Brewing Company in Colorado. Her homosexuality became an issue of public notice in the 2000 campaign, but the issue did not factor significantly in the election. The vice president’s most recent comments may change all that.

Some immediately welcomed this intersection of the personal and the political. Political commentator E.J. Dionne, Jr. celebrated Mr. Cheney’s comments in a column for *The Washington Post*. In Dionne’s view, the vice president’s comments indicated that he “has a lesbian daughter who matters more to him than ideology.” As Dionne sees it, this kind of statement represents an opening for the administration to soften its opposition to same-sex marriage by tying the issue to personal relationships and distancing itself from “ideology” that would oppose the right of homosexual couples to marry.

Dionne went on to relate a personal angle of his own to this story, telling his readers that his late mother, “a devout Catholic and as committed to old-fashioned family values as anyone I have ever known,” had a homosexual godson “who was (and remains) as warm and generous a person as you would ever want to know.” According to Dionne, “When my mother discovered my cousin was gay—she was, I think, early among the relatives to know this—she not only accepted the fact, she embraced him and his partner. And she became a committed supporter of gay rights simply because she believed that any attack on gays constituted an attack on her godson.”

As he concluded his column, Dionne related that his mother’s godson, his cousin, recently reported that he and his

partner “had married on May 27.” Dionne finished with a flourish: “I have a feeling that my late mom, who believed in love and fidelity, is somewhere smiling about this.”

The controversy over Mr. Cheney’s comments—and responses like that of E.J. Dionne—cast light on a growing trend that militates against moral clarity and conviction. Hard-line moral relativism is deeply ideological. Following the contours of the postmodern worldview, those committed to the ideology of moral relativism argue that no fixed moral principles exist, and that morality is relative to time, location, and circumstances. In that sense, Vice President Dick Cheney is no moral relativist.

But Mr. Cheney’s comments reveal a different form of moral relativism—a form rooted not in ideology, but in the fact that the issue touches the life of a relative. This new, softer, form of moral relativism is just as insidious as the first, and may be more damaging over the long term.

We would never expect Dick Cheney to offer a philosophical defense of moral relativism. The postmodernist ideology of moral relativism is contrary to his worldview, as has been demonstrated in his words and actions over years of public service. But his comments in Iowa—and his convoluted position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage—are clear evidence of this new form of moral relativism. In this new form, morality is a matter of objective truth and convictional principles—right up to the point that a relative becomes involved.

This softer, non-ideological version of moral relativism presents persons of moral conviction with a clear challenge. Will we hold to our principles and moral convictions, even when a son or daughter is involved? If not, our convictions will be relativized and our moral credibility will be undermined.

Setting aside the convoluted and confusing nature of Mr. Cheney’s comments [what in the world did he mean by stating that all persons should be free “to enter into any kind of relationship they want to”?], we are still left with the fact that the vice president rooted his opposition to a Federal Marriage Amendment in the experience of his daughter. He made no reference to moral principle. He offered no extended argument acknowledging the moral issues at stake. He simply asserted the fact that he and his wife “have a gay daughter, so it’s an issue that our family is very familiar with.”

We should expect Mr. and Mrs. Cheney to love both of their daughters. But love requires truth-telling, not the acceptance of all behavior or “lifestyles.” In the end, the vice president’s comments may not reflect much about the Bush administration’s policy on this issue. But following a pattern now all too familiar, his comments do say a great deal about his willingness to abandon the moral imperative to defend marriage in light of his daughter’s own experience.

This entire episode should serve as a cautionary tale to Christians in the postmodern age. The church’s witness on marriage is already woefully corrupted and compromised by our unwillingness to hold to what we already know about an issue as straightforward as divorce. The church’s convictions on divorce have been undermined by the fact that all of us know and love persons who have been divorced. Few extended families have escaped the reality and aftermath of divorce, and an unwillingness to confront the issue honestly has weakened the Christian defense of marriage, even before the issue of same-sex marriage emerged.

This new form of moral relativism will undermine the church’s moral witness, leading not only to the sending of confused signals in the public square, but to the reality of harmed lives and individuals hurt by this moral compromise. We must name moral relativism for what it is—even when it comes Republican-style.

