



Rebecca Davis & Anthony Petro Receive LGBT Religious History Award

The LGBT Religious Archives Network (LGBT-RAN) announces that two scholars are being honored for the 2011-12 LGBT Religious History Award. The co-honorees are Dr. Rebecca L. Davis for her paper, "My Homosexuality Is Getting Worse Every Day': Norman Vincent Peale, Psychiatry, and the Liberal Protestant Response to Same-Sex Desires in Mid-Twentieth-Century America," and Dr. Anthony Michael Petro for his paper, "Protest Religion! ACT UP, Religious Freedom and the Ethics of Sex." In this seventh year of the LGBT Religious History Award, this is the first time that the jury has selected co-honorees.

Rebecca L. Davis is an assistant professor of history at the University of Delaware, where she teaches courses on the history of sexuality in the U.S., American religious history, the history of marriage and the family, and the histories of immigration and ethnicity. She received her Ph.D. in History from Yale in 2006, where her dissertation won the George Washington Egleston Historical Prize for the Dissertation. She then spent a year as a postdoctoral fellow at Princeton University's Center for the Study of Religion. In 2010 Harvard University Press published her book, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss*, a history of marriage counseling and guidance in the United States since the 1930s. The book examines marriage counselors' often explicit concern with crafting heterosexual identities within the marital relationship during the profession's early years, as well as the crucial involvement of Christian and Jewish clergy in forging links between marital success and the strength of their religious communities. The book has been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Slate*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and numerous other publications. Professor Davis is also the author of several articles and book chapters that examine the intersecting histories of sexuality and religion in the United States.

Her paper, "My Homosexuality is Getting Worse Every Day': Norman Vincent Peale, Psychiatry, and the Liberal Protestant Response to Same-Sex Desires in Mid-Twentieth Century America," was commissioned for a new collection of essays, *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity*, published in 2011 by the University of North Carolina Press. The quotation within the title references the plea of a 29-year-old man who wrote to Peale in 1957, asking the famous minister for help with what he called his "terrible disease." Peale had recently included advice to another young gay man in his bi-weekly column, which ran from 1954 to 1959 in *Look* magazine. Although Peale (the author of the best-selling spiritual self-help book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*) typically incorporated prayer and faith into his recommendations for psychological healing, he wrote that people troubled by same-sex desires needed psychiatric treatment. For Peale and for many of his readers, heterosexual marriage was essential to personal happiness, and same-sex desires posed such fundamental stumbling blocks to marriage's attainment that they required clinical treatment. The letters Peale received in response to his column in *Look* offer a rare glimpse into how liberal Protestant ideas about sexuality, marriage, and psychiatry were received and applied. Some of Peale's correspondents expressed gratitude for the promise of a "cure" for their sins, while others lamented previous, failed attempts to alter their

sexual natures. Yet another subset of correspondents queried Peale about how he reconciled his faith in psychiatric treatment with Biblical statements on homosexuality. Peale's investment in heterosexual marriage as a fundamental institution for human happiness guided his advice on homosexuality and helped shape mid-twentieth-century conversations about how best to respond to same-sex desires.

Anthony Petro serves as assistant professor/faculty fellow in the Religious Studies Program at New York University, where he teaches courses on the history of religion in the United States, American evangelicalism, and religion and medicine. He received a Ph.D. in Religion from Princeton University in 2011, where he also earned a certificate in the study of women and gender. Before Princeton, he worked as the Program Associate for the Feminism and Legal Theory Project at Emory University after earning a M.A. in the Social Sciences from the University of Chicago. In the fall of 2012, he will begin a new position as assistant professor in the Department of Religion at Boston University.

Petro's current project, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion*, demonstrates how Christian leaders and activists in the United States have posited HIV/AIDS as a moral epidemic, an understanding that has consequently informed the scope of cultural and political mobilizations all over the world. Drawing upon archival research, oral histories, and textual analysis, this project maps the moral languages regarding sexuality – and especially homosexuality – through which evangelical, mainline Protestant, and Catholic leaders and AIDS activists have sought to make sense of the epidemic. Moving beyond the politics of the culture wars and the focus on the Christian Right, *After the Wrath of God* tracks how mainstream religious understandings of sexual morality and AIDS have shaped national and global public health discourses about prevention and care. History illustrates in turn how the AIDS epidemic has transformed American Christianity, by allowing religious leaders and organizations a new site through which to articulate their understandings of sexuality, health, and social activism.

His paper, “Protest Religion! ACT UP, Religious Freedom, and the Ethics of Sex,” grew out of this project. It examines the Stop the Church movement, orchestrated by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and the Women's Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM!), which culminated in a nationally publicized protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City in 1989. Protesting the Catholic Church's stance on condoms and abortion, ACT UP members sought to limit the role of conservative religious leaders in the debates about public health and HIV prevention, while also challenging the very terms of 'religion' itself, often reclaiming it for their own needs.

Davis and Petro will receive their awards and speak about their research and writing at the annual LGBT-RAN dinner on Saturday evening, June 15, 2012, at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. The dinner is open to the public. For more information go to www.lgbtran.org or email mbowman@lgbtran.org.