

“To Cure a Sinful Nation: ‘Conversion Therapy’ and the Making of America, 1920 to Today” explores the cultural and political battleground of “conversion therapy,” a broad range of therapeutic and counseling practices that aim, in some way, to “cure,” “change,” “redeem,” “restore,” or “repair” a person’s attraction to the same-sex and/or their gender identity. Over the past ninety years, there have been many types of conversion therapy, often centered around psychiatric and religious discourses about health, wellness, and morality. What unites these disparate therapeutic and counseling practices is a concern over “family values.” Often justifying their practices with conservative interpretations of the family, practitioners and proponents of conversion therapy have seen their mission as greater than “saving” individual patients. Indeed, they have viewed themselves as protectors of both the American family and Judeo-Christian morality.

“To Cure a Sinful Nation” explains how conversion therapists have advocated masculine domination within families in order to prevent children from becoming homosexual. During the Great Depression and the Second World War, psychoanalysts traced homosexuality’s etiology to weak fathers and strong, domineering mothers. Conversion therapists concerned themselves with son-mother relationships, showing greater worry about the psychosexual development of male children and, at the same time, blaming women for their sons’ homosexuality. In the 1970s, the focus shifted when conversion therapists placed increased emphasis on how fathers needed to be assertive members of their own households. Conversion therapists, in their prescriptions for raising heterosexual children, stressed that fathers should take time off work to bring sons on camping and hunting trips. The renewed emphasis on fatherhood was one way to reassert heterosexual and patriarchal power and influence. Many conversion therapists thought this was

necessary, especially as second wave feminists argued that men were not necessary to raise healthy, well-adjusted children and as gay men and lesbians adopted children of their own.

My study contends that religious understandings of gender and sexuality have been central to the history of conversion therapy. Despite declarations of scientific objectivity, early psychiatrists drew from the Bible to make claims about their patients with same-sex attractions. In 1952, psychiatrists listed “homosexuality” as a mental disorder in the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, once again relying on Judeo-Christian sexual and moral values. In the ensuing years, as gay men and lesbians challenged homosexuality’s pathological status, many psychiatrists dug in for a long and contentious battle. Although the American Psychiatric Association removed “homosexuality” from the *DSM* in 1973, some psychotherapists worked with government officials throughout the eighties and nineties on legislative and judicial efforts, like upholding sodomy laws. In court cases in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, judges pointed to conversion therapists’ expertise where “the sanctity of the family” was concerned.

“To Cure a Sinful Nation” imparts much needed perspective on the history of conversion therapy. In the near future, the Supreme Court will decide if the First Amendment’s free exercise clause protects sexual orientation change and gender identity therapies. What could take precedence over religious freedom, however, is whether the state has a vested interest in protecting citizens from pseudo-scientific forms of therapy and counseling. It is likely that one of the Supreme Court Justices, probably Samuel Alito or Neil Gorsuch, will raise questions about the sanctity of the heteronormative, patriarchal family. In doing so, their statements will underscore the strength and persistence of the ideology of traditional family values, the theme so crucial for understanding the history of conversion therapy.