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The new blacklisters

By Jeff Jacoby, Globe Columnist, 5/25/2000

You can hear arguments for and against same-sex marriage. You can hear arguments for and against gays in the military. You can hear arguments for and against taking the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality literally.

Should openly gay scoutmasters be allowed in the Boy Scouts? Should "gay pride" be celebrated with flamboyant parades? Should churches ordain gay and lesbian clergy? You can hear arguments for and against each proposition.

Or can you?

Increasingly, gay activists are insisting that you *not* be allowed to hear the arguments for and against. Instead of trying to refute opinions they don't share, the new strategy is to label them "hateful" or "dangerous" and to silence the people making them.

The campaign to kill the "Dr. Laura" TV show before it debuts this fall is an alarming case in point.

Laura Schlessinger's views are anathema to many. A moral traditionalist, she makes it clear that she disapproves of homosexuality. It is a form of "deviant sexual behavior," she says - the result of a "biological error" that impedes gays and lesbians from being attracted to the opposite sex.

Homosexuality is hardly the only practice Schlessinger disapproves of, as anyone who listens to her knows. She opposes premarital sex, abortion, single motherhood, serial marriage, people who cheat on their spouses, working parents who put their children in day care, and most divorce. She is rigid and censorious and blunt. She is also stunningly popular, far and away the most successful woman in radio history and the author of four bestselling books. In the

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Alternative views

marketplace of ideas, she has found many takers.

Not surprisingly, she also has many detractors, who denounce her views as "homophobia" and bigotry. But rather than debate those views, her opponents aim to suppress them. They are aggressively lobbying Paramount to cancel "Dr. Laura," flooding TV stations that have signed up to carry it with letters and calls of protest, and putting pressure on advertisers to shun not only the TV show but the radio program as well. Last week Procter & Gamble yielded to the pressure, dropping its plan to sponsor the new program. A few days earlier United Airlines announced it would no longer run ads for Schlessinger's radio show in its in-flight magazine.

Once upon a time, activists on the left hated blacklists and loved free speech. They embraced the classic position attributed to Voltaire: I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. Gay-rights advocates especially appealed for tolerance. Live and let live, they said. To each his own. Be open-minded.

No more. "Tolerance" now means no tolerance for speakers whose opinions on homosexuality are politically incorrect. We don't like what Dr. Laura says; therefore, she may not say it.

It isn't only Dr. Laura.

On a growing number of college campuses, evangelical student groups are being punished for adhering to traditional Christian views on homosexuality. When the Christian Fellowship at Tufts University would not allow a lesbian member to run for a leadership post - not because of her sexual orientation, but because she rejected the group's belief that homosexual activity is wrong - it was stripped of its status as a legitimate campus organization. That meant it lost its student government funding and the right to use "Tufts" in its name, and was barred from communicating through university channels.

The ruling was later overturned on due process grounds, but may be reimposed in the fall. Meanwhile, there has been no reprieve for the Christian Fellowship at Grinnell College in Iowa, which was "derecognized" in 1997. Similar campaigns to penalize evangelicals are underway at Middlebury College in Vermont, Whitman College in Washington, and Ball State University in Indiana.

Those leading the assault on the Christian groups claim they simply want to stop discrimination against gays. But the religious fellowships *don't* discriminate against gays; they welcome members of any sexual identity. The groups do, however, insist on the right to decide what they believe, and that is what the campus inquisitors cannot abide. Like the protesters trying to get the plug pulled

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on Dr. Laura, they demand outward ideological conformity. No one may dissent from their particular gay agenda, and those who do must be stifled. As this intolerant "tolerance" spreads, so does the chill it generates.

Last month The New York Times reported on three religious scholars - "respected Protestant theologians" and "thoughtful conservatives" all - who had been invited to join a televised discussion of same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay ministers. Each refused, afraid of being vilified as "antigay and anticompassion" if he deviated from the liberal line. None of the three would even allow the Times to quote him by name. One said he worried about family members who "had felt the `heat' for his previous public statements."

Intimidation, censorship, blacklisting, "derecognition" - these are the coward's ways to win an argument. Those who believe in gay rights used to also believe in reason, persuasion, and the free exchange of ideas. What happened?

Jeff Jacoby is a Globe columnist.

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