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Fact Checking With Rabbi Cowen

Introduction

Today I had a meeting with Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen, writer of a [“The homosexual “anti-bullying” program for schools: an unconscionable stratagem”](#) – an article on the Australian Family Associations website. Read it before reading this, have a strong drink nearby. The article got a fair bit of social media play and was the subject of an *MX* column. I arranged to meet Rabbi Cowen as a Monash student – he is a Monash academic – to discuss some of the more misleading aspects of his article. From the start I got the impression he wanted to talk theology and I wanted to talk facts. I had no interest in getting into a religious discussion and was chiefly concerned that an academic would publish something so poorly researched. He mentioned that some of his fellow staff had complained about his article to some higher authority, he felt this was some sort of campaign against his religious beliefs. I explained that –given what I outline below – he had used his position as an academic to give a very misleading impression. Here’s how things played out.

Which program?

I started by admitting I wasn’t sure what program Rabbi Cowen had a problem with. He didn’t mention a program in the article, only “a movement”. The *MX* column indicates that Rabbi Cowen’s article was in response to the [Safe Schools Coalition Victoria](#) – a group of individuals and schools with the goal of creating safe schools for GLBTI students. If this was the case, then Cowen was incorrect to talk about unconstitutionality and religious freedom as this is not a governmental organisation (although I’d imagine it would receive government grants). Importantly, whatever this organisation did would not be *imposed* on schools. Rabbi Cowen stated he couldn’t remember the particular organisation, only that he knew that a program was being used as a “test case” for something to be rolled out by schools – I couldn’t find any evidence of this (?). [I couldn’t find a single *new* governmental program on anti-bullying](#) – other than ‘cyber bullying’ – and especially nothing related to GLBTI young people. The one anti-bullying report I could find which mentioned [“homophobic bullying” wasn’t very controversial. simply saying that teachers should be aware it occurs.](#)

Rabbi Cowen stated that it was probably the Safe Schools Coalition report, and that he had a particular issue with a *voluntary* auditing resource to find out [“is your school a safe and inclusive one?”](#). We didn’t talk much about the audit report itself, I just continued by pointing out the misleading statements in his article. As far as I can tell, the Safe Schools Coalition appears to be an organised way for schools and individuals to share resources and information.

Misleading statements

I stated that he had made several misleading statements, below the standard which would be expected of an academic. Including:

- That support for gay rights and welfare for GLBTI youth is motivated by an ideology of “materialist hedonism”.

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I stated that I found my moral framework guided by an Aristotelean idea of human flourishing. He stated that this framework was against a religious perspective – *don't tell Catholics!*

- That tackling bullying should not address the motivations behind the bullying. He cites the work of Evelyn M Field on "bully blocking" to back up this perspective.

I emailed Evelyn Field and read him her response:

Hi,

Quite frankly I don't know what he means, he seems to have taken some things out of context to prove his point.

The theory of bullying is separate to dealing with it.

If you are interested , check out my books,

The fact that some young people get bullied at school because they are nerdy, gay, fat or even beautiful is awful.

Thus we need to empower every child to block bullies. The key is to help them manage their feelings and disguise any vulnerability around nasty kids.

Regards,

Evelyn M Field FAPS

- That exposure to homosexuality makes adolescents more likely to identify as gay.

I stated there was absolutely no evidence to back up this claim. I continued by stating it goes against modern understanding of sexual orientation as an emergent characteristic which is formed in early childhood. This is how the [Australian Psychological Society](#) responds to such claims:

"Despite what some people claim, there is no evidence that society's greater acceptance of homosexuality results in more people having a homosexual sexual orientation. The greater numbers of people identifying as homosexual are a result of fewer people fighting their homosexual feelings while attempting to live heterosexual lives."

"For most people, sexual orientation emerges in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience. Some people report trying very hard over many years to change their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, with no success."

He responded that he didn't understand how sexual orientation could be an emergent characteristic (although he did realise that some people couldn't change their urges). He however stated that an exposure to "pro-

homosexual” media would increase the likelihood of homosexual behaviour.

- That there is no definitive link between anti-gay bullying and GLB suicide. He noted that it may play a factor, but stated there could be *greater* factors.

I stated that I found this position particularly offensive. There is a [clear link](#) between bullying and increased suicidal ideations. Studies estimate nearly 30 percent of gay youths attempt suicide (Nicholas and Howard, 1998) (Remafedi, 1999; Howard et al. 2002). In a recent study by Hillier et al (1998) of 14-21 year old same sex attracted youth, 46% reported they had been verbally abused because of their sexuality and 16% had been physically abused. [* EDIT: Violence has *increased* to 80% according to [latest report](#)] Almost 70 percent experienced this abuse at school; 60 percent of this abuse was inflicted by other students.

- That young people are sexually fluid and confused. It is therefore possible for them to identify as gay or lesbian even though they have potential to be heterosexual.

The study he uses to back up this claim is part of a report by the [American Academy of Paediatricians](#) which notes:

In a large, population-based study of junior and senior high school students performed in the late 1980s that measured sexual fantasy, emotional attraction, and sexual behavior, found that more than 25% of 12-year-old students felt uncertain about their sexual orientation. This uncertainty decreased with the passage of time and increasing sexual experience to only 5% of 18-year-old students. Only 1.1% of students reported themselves as predominantly homosexual or bisexual. However, 4.5% reported primary sexual attractions to persons of the same sex, which better reflects actual sexual orientation.

I looked at the [original study](#) which came up with the statistic for 'uncertain'. The stat came from one of the questions on a survey delivered to 12-year old students. Students were asked "what term best describes your sexual orientation?" and were provided with several categories including: primarily homosexual, somewhat homosexual, bisexual, somewhat heterosexual, heterosexual and not sure. The term 'uncertain' corresponded to ticking the 'not sure' box. I explained that not being sure of your sexual orientation is not the same as 'confusion' or 'sexual fluidity'. An emergent perspective of sexual orientation does not mean teenagers are able to identify their orientation at such a young age.

Unconscionable Use Of Expert

One of the most misleading aspects of Cowen's original article was the use of an email by the [American College of Paediatricians](#) to back up his claims. The American College of Paediatricians (ACP) - not to be confused with the American Academy of Paediatricians (AAP) which is the professional body also referenced in the article- is an advocacy group of ~60 paediatricians in the US who campaign for socially conservative causes. In regard to the email sent by the ACP the AAP released the following statement which I read to Rabbi Cowen:

The letter promotes another campaign titled "Facts About Youth," which professes to offer guidance to educators on "approaches to students experiencing sexual orientation and gender identity confusion." Their campaign does not acknowledge the scientific and medical evidence regarding sexual orientation, sexual identity, sexual health, or effective health education. The AAP encourages school administrators and officials, teachers, parents, and youth to become familiar with and utilize the AAP developed and endorsed resources on this issue for reliable, sound, scientific, medical advice.

The response by Rabbi Cowen to this revelation was telling: he stated he felt that professional medical bodies had a political agenda and that just because a research body was religiously inspired didn't negate their viewpoints. He stated he had similar feelings on the scientific perspective on evolution (*I know... *facepalm**).

Final Thoughts

We then had a long argument about the existence of God, the evidence for evolution and why being non-religious didn't make me compulsively steal things. None of this was particularly interesting. We eventually concluded that Rabbi Cowen was guided by his personal experience with God – which I questioned – and in regard to many issues this was a chasm we could not cross. [He explained the Jewish perspective on homosexuality](#). I remained unpersuaded, heathenism intact. Nevertheless, as I mentioned in my introduction I never intended this to be a religious conversation but a questioning of poor research by an academic. I'm happy to say -despite Cowen's skepticism of science- that he is now willing to correct his mistakes and took much of my research with him.

Not completely unproductive.

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COMMENTS (4)



#1 by **Tom G** on February 22, 2012 - 9:53 pm

Thankyou for having that discussion with Rabbi Dr Cowen, and for writing this post. I think you've identified and honed in on the main problem with his article, which is that he makes so many bold and unsupported claims outside of his area of expertise. The best way to counter that kind of misinformation is simply by raising the relevant facts, which is what you have done here. Hopefully he's learned something from his exchange with you.



#2 by **DysfunctionalJ** on February 23, 2012 - 11:34 am

Thank you. I hope he has to.



#3 by **Ittay** on February 23, 2012 - 10:59 am

Thank you for sharing this. In the meeting, did he defend at any time his suggestion that GLBT youth should have "reparative therapy"?



#4 by **DysfunctionalJ** on February 23, 2012 - 11:32 am

Thanks. At one point in our discussion of the American Psychological Association's opinion on homosexuality, he mentioned the work of Robert L. Spitzer on the possibility of "ex-gays". I was well aware of Spitzer's research and explained it to him. In fact I have blogged about it here: <http://sophistintraining.wordpress.com/2012/01/08/a-skeptical-but-not-entirely-dismissive-look-at-gay-reparative-therapy/>

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