

HARRIET L. WILKES HONORS COLLEGE

Finding the Rainbow Connection: From Toleration to Human Dignity and Acceptance in American Life and Law

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The surge in granting equal rights to gays and lesbians in the United States is remarkable. Yet with this surge comes a conflict: the civil rights of gays and lesbians against the rights of religious individuals, predominantly Christians, refusing to tolerate a behavior they think immoral. My thesis focuses on two hypothetical situations: a county clerk refusing to issue a marriage license to an engaged lesbian couple and an inn owner refusing a night's stay to a gay couple. In both cases, the clerk and inn owner refuse service for religious reasons. Normatively, I argue that we must move beyond a framework of toleration to a system of equal respect and understanding of our fellow human beings. Legally, I argue that the rights of religious expression and exercise should not trump the civil rights of gays and lesbians in the public sphere.