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Using Gospel Music's Secrets to Confront Black Homophobia

By **SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN**

Anthony Heilbut has been a leading producer, reviewer and historian of black gospel music for nearly a half-century. During that time, he came to know many performers who were gay or bisexual, and he treated their private lives as private. Mr. Heilbut's authoritative book "The Gospel Sound," published in 1971 and updated several times since then, contained just one sentence about homosexuality.

Now, amid the volatile national debate about same-sex marriage, Mr. Heilbut has thrown the doors open to what he calls the "secret closet" of gays in gospel. In a lengthy chapter of his forthcoming book, "The Fan Who Knew Too Much," he not only pays homage to the artistic role of gays and bisexuals, but also accuses black Christians, clergy and laity alike, of hypocrisy in opposing same-sex marriage while relying on gay people for much of the sacred music of the black church.

The timing of Mr. Heilbut's book, and the intensity of his argument, has thrust it from the dusty corners of arts criticism into the heat and light of the political arena in a presidential election year. Same-sex marriage, more than any other issue, has forced the black church as an institution to try to reconcile its dueling strains of ideological liberalism and theological conservatism. At the congregational level, it has meant the awkward coexistence of gay musicians and antigay preaching and casual ridicule.

"The family secret has become public knowledge," Mr. Heilbut writes in his book, "and the black church, once the very model of civil rights, has acquired a new image, as the citadel of intolerance." Left unchecked, he continues, the trend "would introduce an ugly but not uninformed term, 'black redneck.'"

While Mr. Heilbut's book is only beginning to be widely distributed and read, his contentions have provoked vigorous dispute from some black clergy members. Their complaint, interestingly, is far less with Mr. Heilbut's assertions about the significance of gay performers in gospel music than with that fact's relevance to same-sex marriage.

“Ludicrous, outrageous and nonsensical,” said the Rev. Emmett C. Burns Jr., the pastor of Rising Sun First Baptist Church near Baltimore, who is a prominent opponent of Maryland’s new law permitting same-sex marriage. “The black church respects the talents of musicians who have gay and lesbian tendencies. But the church never gives up its beliefs that such persuasions are anathema to individuals within the church and in direct conflict with the Bible.”

On the one hand, black voters have disproportionately supported ballot measures in California and North Carolina, among other states, that effectively banned same-sex marriage. Black megachurch pastors have figured prominently in those campaigns.

Yet last month President Obama endorsed same-sex marriage, and recent polling suggests that black voters have been moderating their opinion on the issue. In polls by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, black opposition to same-sex marriage fell to 49 percent this April from 67 percent in 2004.

Days after the president’s statement, one of the most influential young pastors in America, the Rev. Otis Moss III of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, spoke from his pulpit in defense of gay rights, including the right to marry.

Mr. Heilbut, 71, discovered gospel while exploring Harlem as a teenage member of the N.A.A.C.P. As he went on to write “The Gospel Sound” and to produce award-winning gospel records, he was also immersed in the everyday homophobia of the black church. “I heard it forever,” he said in a recent interview. “‘He’s a great singer, but he’s a sissy.’ Or, ‘He did a terrible thing, but at least he’s not a sissy.’”

His reasons for breaking his silence are partly practical. Many of the musicians he identifies as gay or bisexual — James Cleveland, Alex Bradford, Clara Ward, Sister Rosetta Tharpe — are now dead, and in Mr. Cleveland’s case, dead from AIDS.

In the book, Mr. Heilbut recounts a conversation with another gay musician, Charles Campbell, shortly before his death. When Mr. Heilbut asked if he could “tell his story and quote him,” Mr. Campbell replied: “Sure, baby, I think it needs to be told. It all needs to be told.”

Leading scholars of black Christianity see both value and risk in Mr. Heilbut’s challenge to churches on same-sex marriage, and more broadly on their attitude about homosexuality.

“His argument should be taken seriously,” said Jonathan L. Walton, a professor of Christian

morals at Harvard. "It's hard to have any conversation about this brilliant cultural production — gospel music — without affirming the prominent role that same-gender-loving people have played and continue to play."

Professor Walton, however, said a mix of motives and actions more complicated than hypocrisy informed the stances of black churches toward gay and bisexual members. "The practice is a lot more accepting of G.L.B.T. brothers and sisters than the public professions," he said. "When one is forced to make a public profession — as in a referendum — it seems like people opt for their more conservative instincts."

Lawrence A. Mamiya, a professor of religion at Vassar College and a co-author of "The Black Church in the African American Experience," commended Mr. Heilbut for drawing attention to a theological schism within black Christianity.

"Heilbut's work will pose some problems for black clergy and churches," he wrote in an e-mail. "He is correct in pointing out that there is the M. L. King tradition of social justice among black churches that could help to change the situation. But right now, the conservatism of the prosperity gospel holds sway."

Mr. Heilbut, writing in the present, lives very much in the past. His favorite era of gospel music ended around 1960. What has persisted unabated is the homophobia that compelled him to write the new book. "It still exists, the same toxic atmosphere," he said. "This is not the past. The same pathos continues."

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