
FIRST THINGS

FAKE CRIMES

by
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Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and pro-family organizations have a common adversary, one that is virulent and relentless. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a powerful progressive advocacy group that says its primary mission is to fight hatred, teach tolerance, and seek justice. Despite its noble beginnings in the years following the civil rights movement, during which it fought white supremacist groups resisting social change and the rule of law, the SPLC now works to advance the agenda of the cultural left. Ironically, given the deeply Christian character of the civil rights movement, the SPLC now equates traditional Christian and pro-family organizations with hate groups such as the Aryan Nations, the Ku Klux Klan, and neo-Nazis. What makes these religious groups an SPLC target? A shared biblical worldview that condemns homosexuality and transgenderism.

The SPLC's determined efforts to paint conservative Christian organizations as anti-gay were evident back in spring 2005, when it issued an *Intelligence Report* that profiled twelve of them, claiming that they have "turned the anti-gay movement into a virtual industry over the last three decades." According to the authors, early crusaders such as Anita Bryant, Reverend Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson inspired other fundamentalist activists to organize around "the polarizing issue of homosexuality." It proceeded to profile each one, marking three of them as earning SPLC's designation "hate group." The groups targeted in this retaliatory strike were Alliance Defending Freedom (formerly Alliance Defense Fund), American Family Association, American Vision, Chalcedon Foundation, Christian Action Network, Concerned Women for America, Coral Ridge Ministries/Center for Reclaiming America, Family Research Council, Family Research Institute, Focus on the Family, Summit Ministries, and the Traditional Values Coalition.

The SPLC had this to say about the Alliance Defense Fund:

In 1993, with gay-rights issues increasingly being contested in the courts, a coalition of 35 Christian Right groups founded the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF). Key founders included D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Ministries, Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association, and James Dobson of Focus on the Family.

ADF President Alan Sears was a culture-war veteran, having served as executive director of Attorney General Edwin Meese's Commission on Pornography during the Reagan Administration.

Today, more than a decade later, the SPLC pro-family "hate groups" hit list has expanded to at least forty-two organizations. Among those added to the anti-LGBT list are the American College of Pediatricians, Campus Ministry USA, Center for Family and Human Rights (C-FAM), Liberty Counsel, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), the Ruth Institute, and World Congress of Families/International Organization for the Family.

The SPLC defines an organization as anti-LGBT if it attempts to "link homosexuality to pedophilia [or] claim that same-sex marriage and LGBT people, in general, are dangers to children." The phrasing "dangers to children" makes it sound as if these "hate groups" all say that LGBT adults look at children as targets for exploitation. But, in truth, the SPLC also regards groups and individuals that merely claim that children of same-sex parents suffer greater rates of dysfunction in adulthood than the overall average as belonging in the category of organizations that assert LGBT adults are a "danger." The SPLC adds that an organization "hates" gays if it states that there is a "conspiracy called the 'homosexual agenda' at work that seeks to destroy Christianity and the whole of society." Again, the word "conspiracy" makes it sound as if the religious and family organizations all make delusional claims of an LGBT plot to wreck the country. But the SPLC includes in this category of paranoia groups that merely claim there is a political agenda that highlights gay rights and lifestyles. Once an organization publishes anything that counters the politically correct narrative on homosexuality, it can reasonably expect to appear on the SPLC's watch list.

The SPLC's aim is not just to shame its targeted groups; it's to destroy them. Mark Potok, a former *Intelligence Report* editor, explained its mission at a 2007 conference on hate: "Sometimes, the press will describe us as monitoring hate groups and so on. . . . I want to say plainly that our aim in life is to destroy these groups, to completely destroy them." SPLC president Richard Cohen says this about the Family Research Council: "In many ways, they're more dangerous to our country than hatemongers who wear robes and hoods."

In 2012 the SPLC attacked the American College of Pediatricians (ACPed) and NARTH in an article charging that these (supposedly) anti-LGBT organizations misuse science and medicine to attack gays. ACPed is composed of health-care professionals who in 2002 left the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) after the AAP publicly endorsed the placement of foster children and adoptees in the homes of gay couples. The mission of ACPed, according to its website, is

to enable *all* children to reach their optimal physical and emotional health and well-being.

To this end, the College produces position and policy statements on matters unique to the child and the family. It is the goal of the College that these statements be based upon the best available research, and unencumbered by political or societal opinion . . . in advocating for that which is best for children, adolescents and their families.

The SPLC argued that ACPed defames gays and lesbians while pretending to protect children. It describes the group as "a professional organization for socially conservative pediatricians and healthcare professionals . . . advocating for a prohibition against adoption rights for same-sex couples and also offering high praise for reparative therapy." It also claims that ACPed "often serves as a supposedly scientific source for groups pushing utter falsehoods about LGBT people."

In 2016, ACPed issued a statement warning of the harm gender ideology does to children and the dangers of using drugs for treating young children diagnosed with gender dysphoria. The SPLC responded that this "anti-LGBT group" had released an "anti-trans" position statement and accused ACPed of having "deliberately misrepresented legitimate research in its attacks on LGBT people." Indeed, ACPed has "continued to pump out demonizing pseudoscience and falsehoods about LGBT people." But SPLC's melodramatic language doesn't quite match the evidence. The worst examples of "pseudoscience and

falsehoods” that SPLC can come up with are that ACPeds judges homosexual relationships “promiscuous, a danger to children, unstable,” and that “LGBT people experience ‘shortened lifespans.’”

Unfortunately, however, people aren’t much inclined to dig into the details once they have read headlines about hate and bias. SPLC’s “[hate map](#)” seems scientific and conscientious. Posing as a moral watchdog gives the organization considerable power. The media quote it all the time. Aware of its reach, many scholars shift positions or avoid certain research subjects for fear of arousing the ire of the group. It is far easier to acquiesce and backpedal than to fight a multimillion-dollar organization that doesn’t hesitate to smear people by calling them “haters.”

The SPLC believes it has a moral obligation to prevent adults and children from receiving medical or psychological treatment that doesn’t affirm the gay and lesbian lifestyle. The science is to be judged by whether it accords with LGBT “rights” as defined by the advocates. The SPLC doesn’t call for scientific examination of whether LGBT relationships are unstable or not. It condemns outright any research or advocacy that supports traditional marriage. Until a person needs medical care, there is very little information on the negative health consequences of homosexual sex, and the SPLC backs that suppression of information. Research showing risks of homosexual sex is ignored so that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) community agenda can advance. In defending themselves against the SPLC’s hate label, religious groups can’t even turn to science for support.

In 2017, the forty-two pro-family organizations targeted by the SPLC formed a coalition to expose the biased nature of the group’s ideological targeting. They urged investigators and reporters to stop citing the SPLC as an authority. In an open letter last September to the media, the coalition called on journalists to cease consulting the SPLC as if it were a reliable monitor of hate and violence in America, not “a discredited, left-wing, political activist organization.” It is “the height of irresponsible journalism,” the authors continued, for the media to echo the SPLC’s efforts to link “public interest law firms and think tanks with neo-Nazis and the KKK.” Labeling an organization as a hate group hurts fundraising and can lead to the denial of access to credit card–processing vendors, search engine rankings, and ministry partners. The Ruth Institute, for instance, was kicked off an online credit card–processing platform because of its traditional Catholic position on homosexuality and transgenderism. Coral Ridge Ministries was denied a listing on AmazonSmile, where registered charities can receive donated funds from Amazon

shoppers. This occurred after GuideStar USA (an information service that reports on U.S. nonprofit organizations) gave Coral Ridge a bad rating because of the SPLC's hate group designation. After a principled backlash from conservative organizations, GuideStar USA stopped relying on the SPLC's declarations.

Coral Ridge and the rest of the forty-seven-member coalition continue to fight back. In August 2017, Coral Ridge filed a federal religious discrimination lawsuit against GuideStar USA and the SPLC (it dropped GuideStar from the suit after it stopped using SPLC's hate groups designation for nonprofits). In addition, the coalition created SPLCexposed, a website designed to educate the public about the SPLC's goals and tactics. It features prominent figures criticizing the SPLC such as John Stossel ("Profiting Off Hate"), Ben Carson (who was placed on an SPLC "extremist" list), Ayaan Hirsi Ali (also labeled an "extremist"), and Victor Davis Hanson, who has spoken on Fox News about the ways in which corporate America is intimidated by activist groups wielding charges of racism.

It's critical we continue to reveal to the public what the SPLC really is. The organization has piles of money—George Clooney gave them \$1 million in August—and it wields considerable power over liberal news outlets and Democratic members of Congress. It has declared itself an enemy of Christians loyal to biblical teaching, and it fights a no-holds-barred propaganda war against them. It must be met with truth, firmly and cogently and loudly.

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Photo via splcenter.org.