Court: Boy Scouts not for all boys

Marred ideals drive Scouts

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The California Supreme Court decision upholding the Boy Scouts of America’s right to ban gays is a setback to advocates of gay rights. It stands in stark contrast to decisions earlier this month by the U.S. Supreme Court validating same-sex harassment claims and by a New Jersey appeals court throwing out the Boy Scouts anti-gay policy.

Whatever happens in the courts, however, it is increasingly clear that they are ill-equipped to handle the deeper issues that give rise to anti-gay discrimination in the first place. As African Americans discovered during the early years of the civil rights movement, even legal victories don’t mark the end of hostile attitudes or outright bigotry.

These attitudes are rooted in the way today’s culture views masculinity and heterosexuality — views that are in no small part perpetuated by organizations like the Scouts themselves. It’s no mistake that signature gay discrimination cases — like the one involving California Scout leader Timothy Curran or New Jersey Eagle Scout James Dale — involve individuals seeking equal treatment for gay men in traditionally all-male institutions.

And while the cases and their resulting rulings apply to both lesbians and gay men, the arguments and tensions almost always come down to how traditional concepts of masculinity can be preserved in organizations that must accommodate women, gays, and others — anyone who threatens long-held ideas of what it means to be a man.

A cult of traditional masculinity requires clear-cut distinctions between the genders — and between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Traditionally all-male social institutions (such as the military, sports clubs, college fraternities, religious organizations, Boy Scouts) grapple with ways of maintaining the social aspects of male-bonding and friendship while erasing any possible misinterpretations of homosexuality. This requires a sharply drawn distinction between masculinity and homosexuality.

As a result, gays are kicked out of Boy Scouts. Women find it a struggle to be a part of the military, and gays are run out entirely. The real issue is not the ability of these individuals to do the job. The underlying problem for these institutions is that the presence of women and gay men call into question what it means to be masculine. For the hidebound heterosexual man in such organizations, the presence of gay men poses disturbing questions:

How can we demonstrate that we are “real men” when those who are not “masculine” can do the same thing? How can we bond with each other, as men are supposed to, if we risk being labeled as gay?

The matter of the Boy Scouts has yet to be addressed by the New Jersey State Supreme Court, though California’s ruling bodes ill. Similar cases are pending in courts in Chicago and the District of Columbia.

Missing from these arguments is any concern for the way the Boy Scout organization itself defines and forms the concept of masculinity, and how that in turn affects its attitudes about gays.

Better that the Scouts and other traditionally male organizations think hard about the messages the courts are sending, and take these cases as an opportunity to examine their own core values.

A spokesman for the national office of the Boy Scouts argues that “avowed homosexuals” are not appropriate role models for their values, perhaps suggesting that closeted ones are acceptable. (Many gay men have been Scouts, myself included, while hiding our sexual orientation.) Based on this assertion, the Scouts prefer concealment over honesty and integrity.

But which traditional Scout value encourages hiding in the closet and lying about oneself? The best role models for Boy Scouts should be those who demonstrate dignity and profess equality. Masculinity in its most heroic form would not cower from the differences of others and would welcome diversity in a true embracing bond of friendship. Based on their behavior to date, the leaders of Scouting are not prepared for such displays of the most fundamental of human values.

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