

Religious Behavior of Gay Men

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to be presented to Society for the Scientific Study of Religion

November 1992

introduction

Given the absence of any published literature on the religious beliefs and behaviors of gay men, we devised a questionnaire that also incorporated the Rokeach value scales and some Gallup questions. Questionnaires were distributed through gay religious organizations and at an annual Gay Pride parade. Out of 500 distributed, 106 were returned by mail to a university departmental address. Thirty-five of those who returned the anonymous questionnaires provided, in a separate mailing, names and addresses to indicate willingness for an interview (these interview materials will be described in subsequent publication).

Our first analysis of these data, presented here, is highly exploratory due to the nature of the sample. Nevertheless, it may help chart the way for future studies. There are a number of issues to be covered in any attempt to describe the relationships among gay men, religious institutions, and religiosity generally.

Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1 contains some broad descriptions of this sample. The distributions of age and religious orientation show wide spread. It will be harder, however, to assess the effects of education since the data-gathering yielded essentially individuals with at least some college experience. While there appears a spread in income, the student status of many respondents makes dubious any generalization about the effects of income or social class. The sample is almost all-white, reflecting to some extent the geographical source.

insert Table 1 about here

Measures of religiosity.

We will describe our sample with minimal use of tabulation, since our interest must be confined to general issues. In analyzing the sample, we have found four items to be useful. These are shown in Table 2. The degree of religious activity is somewhat higher than the U.S. population, an artifact of the data-gathering through churches as well as the Gay Pride parade. One of these churches was a gay and lesbian congregation affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

The percent of born-again respondents roughly parallels the U.S. population. Attitudes toward the Bible indicate an insignificant number of evangelical/fundamentalist respondents. Since college-experience does not significantly reduce literalist beliefs, this needs to be analyzed as a possible effect of a gay orientation. For purposes of generalization, we have characterized "present religious orientation" in terms of the



Smile

traditions that respondents used to characterize themselves. Protestants and Catholics are "conventional," nones and atheist/agnostics are "none," and humanists are "minimal."

insert Table 2 about here

Differences between high- and low-religiosity gay men

As a background for the ultimate issues of how male gayness affects religiosity, we will first look at contrasts within this sample in regard to levels of religious orientation, experience, and activity, as well as age and education. Contrasting percentages will be cited, drawn from contingency tables evaluated by Cramer's V statistic. Where applicable, significance levels of the overall table are indicated by: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

god

Theism is little affected by age or education but "definite belief" goes from 17.4 percent for the religiously inactive to 82.9*** for the highly active. Of the born-again men, 66.7 percent believe as against 35.7*. Those who regard the Bible as an "ancient book" definitely believe (20.3) as against 79.1*** of those who see it as an "inspired book." Those with conventional orientations are 80.0 percent believers as against the none's 16.0*** percent.

prayer

Prayer practice follows similarly predictable patternings. The most affirming/traditional response to the question about prayer is that "it is always answered." The religiously active chose this (57.6) much more often than the inactives (13.6***). The Bible position also is associated with a great difference; "ancient book" only 12.5 percent, "inspired book" 60.5***. The born-gain factor also made a significant difference, 54.5 as against 25.4*.

meditation

Responses to a question about meditation show a different and very interesting pattern, as indicated by the data in Table 3.

insert Table 3 about here

Jesus

Beliefs about Jesus were conventional. Respondents were given a spectrum of options from "never lived" through "leader" to "son of God" and "God." Those who saw the Bible as an "ancient book" saw him as a -less-than-divine "leader" (61.0%) as against those who regarded the Bible as "inspired" (16.3%***). Among the born-again, 60.6 percent saw him as "son of God" or "God" as compared to 34.3** percent of the non-born-again. Among those who were highly active, religiously, 68.6 percent chose those designations as compared to 13.6*** percent of the religiously inactive. Age has a less-linear effect, with 36.4 percent 36.1 percent of the youngest and oldest groups choosing the more conservative responses as against 55.6* percent of the middle, 26 to 36 year-old group.

evolution

Respondents were given Gallup's standard evolution item. Only 3.8 percent were creationists (as opposed to the U.S. 47 percent). Theistic evolutionists comprised 34.6 percent, and nontheistic evolutionists accounted for 61.5 percent. Among these gay men,

Bartruff & Tapp, Religious Behavior of Gay Men
SSSR 11/92 page 2

Smile

age and education showed little effect on beliefs about evolution, but beliefs about the Bible, religious activity, and being born-again were very significantly differentiating. The actual patterns of responses are the reversal of any adult or student population that we have seen, and deserve closer analysis.

Gallup's question distinguishes creationists ("God created human beings pretty much in their present form during the last 10,000 years") from theistic evolutionists (humans "have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process") and nontheistic evolutionists ("God had no part in its process"). The "theistic evolutionists" position, which is the official position of Roman Catholics and many mainstream Protestants, has consistently been shown to be more popular among religious folk. For gay men, however, the reverse is true, as seen from the data in Table 4.

insert Table 4 about here

For this sample, religious activity is strongly associated with the nontheistic position (***) . The same relationship obtains for the born-again, who are 81.8 percent nontheistic evolutionists as against the 52.9** percent for the non-born-again. Those who view the Bible as "inspired" are 88.4 percent nontheistic as against the 42.4*** percent for those who see it as an "ancient" book.

This anomaly can be partially explained by the fact that there are relatively few evangelicals or fundamentalists in this sample, whose religious activity probably heightens creationism (as it does for the 4 men represented on Table 4). We suggest, however, that the effect is so much strongest than would be expected because these gay men have seen theistic evolution used to derogate their own sexual evolution and therefore prefer to view nature and specifically human nature in more clearly Darwinian and anti-telic ways.

astrology

Credence for the claims of astrology seems to vary inversely with religiosity in this culture, and gay men are no exception. Among the "born-again," 42.4 percent are firm disbelievers in astrology as against 18.6* among the non-born-again.

Other cognitive beliefs associated with "new age" movements were explored, with results shown in Table 5. A number of these are clearly at variance with major Western religious beliefs.

insert Table 5 about here



drugs

Asked for their experiences and evaluations of "drugs," forty percent said that they had never been "high." Drug experience is significantly related to those who view the Bible (Table 6) as "inspired" (59.0%) as against 44.0* percent among those who view it as an "ancient book." Closer analysis of the subgroup who reported drug experience also showed relationship only to Bible beliefs. This propensity to use drugs was paralleled by a tendency to see them as "more good than bad" (55.6% to 33.3%*). This puzzling finding goes against almost all other research which has shown religious conservatism to be negatively related to both drug use and drug approval. The anomalies increase when we examine age effects. Non-drug use does not vary with age (Table 7), but the youngest group, 26 and under, is most ambivalent about drug effects (57.9%) with equal numbers (21.1%*) labeling their experiences as "good" and "bad." This may point to the post-college environment being more favorable to positive evaluations of drugs, a position held by 45.5 percent of the college graduates and 60.0* percent of those with graduate degrees (Table 8)

insert Tables 6,7:8 about here

politics

The political views of the born-again reflect something of this same conservatism. 12.4 percent describe themselves as very or somewhat conservative white only 1.4 *percent of he non-born-again see themselves at the right end of the spectrum.

abortion

To determine attitudes about abortion, respondents were asked whether a pregnant married woman should be able to get a legal abortion is she did not want more children. A "No" response is significantly related to the belief that the Bible is inspired, 20.9 percent compared to 6.9** for those who believe the Bible to be an ancient book. This No response is also strongly related to holding a conventional orientation, 22.2 percent as compared to 4.0 for those with no religious orientation.

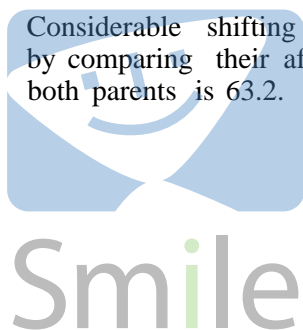
extramarital sexuality

Asked whether it is "always wrong" or "almost always wrong" for a married person to have sexual relations with someone to whom one is not married, the responses were understandably ambiguous. Some gay men would read this as relating only to heterosexual relationships while other would see it more globally. Answers were significantly different for age groups. Younger men (up to 25) affirmed this position by 58.8 percent; those over 35 were 54.3 percent. Those between 26 and 35 affirmed by 72.2**. We suspect that this issue may be entirely independent of any effects of religiosity, but the issues need to be framed less ambiguously to describe gay populations. A series of questions about rights of gay couples to inheritance, medical and life insurance, marriage, and adoption were included. In each case, more than 95 percent affirmed that such rights should be recognized.

~~**religious backgrounds of gay men**~~

Considerable shifting of affiliation has occurred among these gay men. We measure this by comparing their affiliations with those of their parents. The percentage differing from both parents is 63.2. The present affiliations listed are shown in Table 9.

insert Table 9 about here



coming out

Remembering that this sample was drawn from gay men who associate publicly with other gay men, the question "Who knows?" nevertheless gives a rough approximation of the effects of presumed stigma. Responses are shown in Table 10.

insert Table 10 about here

gay social values and religiosity

Respondents were asked about a number of social institutions and values. In many cases, their responses were differentiated on the basis of their religious activity. The religiously active men had little or no trust in trade unions as compared to the inactives (45.7% to 36.3%*). Religious activity is strongly associated with discovering "clear-cut goals and purpose" (20.0% to 13.0%**). Activity leads to strong agreement that "national and international happenings rarely seem as interesting as things that happen in my own community" (11.4% to 39.1%*). The inactives, as expected, justify their inactivity on the grounds that "churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion" (30.4% to 18.2%*). Similarly, the inactives feel that the "rules about morality preached by churches and synagogues today are too restrictive" (60.9% to 37.1%*). The inactives would also welcome "more acceptance of sexual freedom" (100.0% to 85.7%*). The inactives would also welcome "more emphasis on technological improvements (82.6% to 62.9%*).

theology and homosexuality

The only significant difference between the Protestants and Catholics in this sample relates to "the feeling that you were in close contact with something holy or sacred" that had a "lasting influence." Protestants said Yes by 96.3 percent as against the Catholic's 71.4 percent*. Since 16 of the Protestants were affiliated with a gay-lesbian congregation, their responses were compared to those of the other Protestants in the sample. The only significant difference appears in the preferred political designations shown in Table 11.

insert Table 11 about here

This would almost appear to be a contextual self-definition, with those in ordinary Protestant congregations viewing themselves as "radical"*** while those in the gay-lesbian congregation see themselves simply as "very liberal."

The extent of religious activity, however, makes a significant difference in a number of issues specifically relating to homosexuality. Asked whether "homosexuality is a sin," 95.7 percent of the inactives replied "Never," while only 91.4* percent of the highly-active joined in this rejection. Respondents were also asked whether "God condemns

Bartruff & Tapp. Religious Behavior of Gay Men

SSSR 11/92

page 5

Smile

homosexuality." The results are shown in Table 12. This distribution is significant at a .0008 level, but the results are somewhat difficult to interpret. The "middle active"

insert Table 12 about here

group (once to several times monthly) is 'most mixed in response. This is clearly a significant issue, and more study with more varied groups is necessary to determine the effects of activity. It seems clear that the message of recent studies (McNeill, 1988; Boswell, 1980) is reaching gay men and helping them in their own theological redefinitions. The saliency of the gay issue for all church groups, and the fact that several have been considering some positions short of complete condemnation, must also be factored into these responses. A somewhat parallel question was included to make it possible for the non-religious to respond in evaluating homosexuality morally. Results are shown in Table 13. These data make it clearer that the inactive are rejecting the

insert ~~Table 13~~ about here

"historical" moral condemnation of homosexuality, and the more religiously-active men are engaged in moral redefinitions on a more plural basis.

Those who saw homosexuality as either "wrong" or "sinful" were asked for alternatives. They all rejected "become heterosexual" as a possibility and divided almost evenly between "celibacy" and "none." Catholics, interestingly enough, were less likely to recommend celibacy than were Protestants.

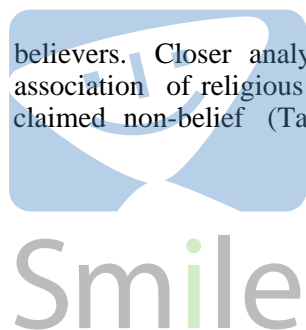
Among the total sample, 88.2 percent preferred monogamous to multiple relationships. This preference was not significantly affected by religious activity, Protestant-Catholic affiliation, or participation in a gay-lesbian congregation.

The issue of alternatives was approached from a different angle with the question "If homosexuality is not a desirable lifestyle, are its effects lessened by monogamy?" Based on responses of Table 11, 49 men could have answered this question, but only 36 did. Only 33.3 percent said Yes. Religious activity affected this response ambiguously but insignificantly.

Our initial concern in this research was to determine the effects of the AIDS epidemic on the religiosity of gay men. It became necessary to set this question within a larger context. We asked whether respondents had known anyone who died of AIDS. "A friend" was cited by 65 of the men, while 35 said they knew no one who had died of the disease. "Lover" was cited by 6, and "family" by 2. We then asked whether beliefs about God or religion had been strengthened as a result of this event. Responses are shown in Table 14 for the 77 men who answered. Clearly, AIDS has not weakened the beliefs of these

insert Table 14 about here

believers. Closer analysis helps understand these responses. Table 15 shows the association of religious activity on beliefs in the efficacy of religion. Note that those who claimed non-belief (Table 14) are excluded, but "inactive believers" are included. There



is clearly a significant positive relationship (*) between activity and the strengthening of belief.

insert Table 15 about here

Conclusions

However tentative our conclusions must be, given the nature and size of the sample, it is clear that gay men who are religiously active do so as a result of reshaping available theologies to fit their lifestyles. One of us called this process "demotheology" (Tapp, 1977). Increasingly, under conditions of religious freedom, theologies are being written from the ground up. This is never a smooth process since it elicits counter-responses. But it seems a certain process. As gay-lesbian rights come to be recognized, and gay-lesbian voices become more audible, we can expect some rapid revisions of beliefs. These will affect sexuality, to be sure, but in all likelihood will reach into the workplace, social values, and politics.

References

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