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Religion and Support for Same-sex Marriage:
Implications from the Literature

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Abstract

This study examines the existing scholarship on the relationship between various religion-related concepts and support for same-sex marriage. From this literature, it is argued that research examining the influence of religion on attitudes about same-sex marriage must attend not only to religious tradition and religiosity, but also to the *everyday theologies* (Moon, 2004) that people of faith use to construct their understanding of issues related to homosexuality, including attitudes about same-sex marriage. Failure to understand the complexity of these underlying religious themes has the potential to obscure important within-group differences potentially leading advocates of same-sex marriage to write off the support of certain religious communities based on the erroneous assumption that members of those communities necessarily embrace the doctrinal stand of their denomination or faith tradition.

Key words: same-sex marriage, gay, lesbian, bisexual, sexual minority, religion, religiosity, everyday theology

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Introduction

For many in the United States, religion plays a central role in shaping their worldview, attitudes, and behaviors (Kosmin, Mayer, & Kayser, 2001). While secularization theory suggests that religion will become decreasingly important in modern societies (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999; Wald, 1997), this has not turned out to be the case. Over the last few decades, numerous studies have demonstrated that religion continues to be important in the lives of a sizable portion of the American population (Hunter, 1991; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999).

Some political theorists have argued for restricting the role played by religion in politics (Rawls, 1993), suggesting that a strict separation of religion and law is one of the major defining principles of liberal democracies (Wintemute, 2002). Others, however, have countered that limiting the public role of religion is problematic and antithetical to the very values of democracy (Carter, 1993). While where to draw the line separating religion from the state is debated in legal and academic circles, historically Americans have viewed religion as separate from the cynicism and self-interest of political life (Demarath & Williams, 1992), which has had consistently falling trust with the American public since the 1960s (Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997). This perceived separation has imbued the religious sphere with a higher moral authority in public political debates (Demarath & Williams, 1992). This perceived legitimacy on morality combined with recent increases in religious involvement in political affairs (Herman, 2001; Regnerus & Smith, 1998) has made religion and religious institutions important social actors in contemporary social movements (Regnerus & Smith, 1998; Soule, 2004).

This importance can be seen in the role that religion has played in the debate on same-sex marriage. Numerous studies have suggested that opposition to same-sex marriage is strongly influenced by religion in the United States (Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006; Pearl & Galupo,

2007), perhaps even stronger regarding same-sex marriage than it has been regarding sexual orientation anti-discrimination policies (Barclay & Fisher, 2003; Wald, Burton, & Rienzo, 1996) because of the role that religious institutions have historically played in defining romantic and sexual relationships (Herman, 1997; Warner, 1999). Even so, Olson and colleagues (2006) have pointed out that few empirical examinations actually exist on the topic, a reality confirmed by this review. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature by examining the existing scholarship on religion and same-sex marriage, and – based on that scholarship – making recommendations for an approach to studying the complexity of those relationships.

Religious Tradition, Religiosity, or Everyday Theologies

Sociological scholarship on the institution of religion has historically differentiated between the concepts of religious tradition and religiosity – that is the devoutness or importance of religion in one’s life (see, for example, Craven, 2004; Regnerus, Smith, & Sikkink, 1997), but has been less concerned with the actual religious beliefs of individuals (Yamane, 2007). Social psychological research on religion, on the other hand, has examined the influence of religion with a predominate focus on actual beliefs and attitudes (Batson & Ventis, 1982). Less seldom, however, have studies examined both, that is, how the endorsement of religious themes or cultural scripts – the actual beliefs that undergird individual’s religious worldviews – influence attitudes and behavior separately from the influence of religious tradition and religiosity. This oversight has potentially obscured the possibility that religious tradition, religiosity, and endorsement of religious beliefs may all contribute uniquely to attitudes and behaviors, echoing Yamane’s (2007) concern that research that fails to move beyond denominational classifications misses much of the explanatory power of religion. In the next section, I outline these three central concepts -- religious tradition, religiosity and religious beliefs -- and suggest why inclusion of all three are critical to understanding the impact of religion on attitudes regarding same-sex marriage.

Religious Tradition

In 2001, 81% of Americans identify themselves with denominational labels (Kosmin et al., 2001) such as Methodist, Catholic, or one of the over 2,000 denominations present in the U.S. (Mead, Hill, & Atwood, 2005).¹ Denominational classifications, however, have not been particularly predictive in social science research, leading Yamane (2007) to suggest that the American religious context might best be characterized as “belonging without believing” (p. 40), in line with Wuthnow’s (1988) prediction about the declining significance of denominations.

In response to this pattern, some scholars have argued that “the sharpest differences are found along broader lines” (Roof & McKinney, 1987, p. 78). In other words, a strategy of looking at *families* of religious traditions rather than at specific denominations might be more fruitful. For example, evangelical Protestantism – one of the most influential religious developments in American religion today (Finke & Stark, 2005) – is better conceptualized as a trans-denominational phenomenon (Smith, 1998). This is evidenced both in research that finds that a high percentage of evangelicals identify as “non-denominational” (Smith, 1998), as well as the development of megachurches that are not denominationally affiliated (Sargaent, 2000). A number of sociology of religion scholars have developed religious tradition classification schema that exemplify this approach (see, for example, Roof & McKinney, 1987; Steensland et al., 2000).

What has emerged from the scholarship examining religious traditions rather than denominations, is a pattern whereby different religious traditions can be seen to ‘array themselves from morally conservative to liberal’ (Yamane, 2007, p. 42). Evangelical Protestants tend to have the most conservative attitudes on issues of ‘morality’², followed by Catholics, mainline and liberal

¹ While there has been increase in identification with non-Christian religions among Americans in the last few decades, overwhelming the U.S. citizenry that identifies as religious, does so within the Christian faith tradition framework (Kosmin et al., 2001).

² The term ‘morality’ is typically used in the literature and American political vernacular to indicate issues regarding sexuality and reproduction. This is clearly problematic in that its narrow focus implies that issues like poverty, access to medical care, and other such issues have no moral dimension, and is also a product of the religious cultural hegemony

Protestants, and then finally Jews who tend to have the most liberal attitudes on these issues.

Seculars – those who have no religious affiliation or who identify as either agnostic or atheist – have consistently expressed the most progressive attitudes towards morality issues (Burdette, Hill, & Moulton, 2005; Steensland et al., 2000).³ This pattern has been found on issues such as abortion and sexuality (Bolzendahl & Brooks, 2005; Evans, 2002a), among others.

Examining religious tradition rather than denominations has been found to be more explanatory of social attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and, as such, is an improvement over using denominational classification (Yamane, 2007). However a number of problems still exist with this approach. Within religious traditions, there is significant variability regarding how unified respondents within that tradition are in their attitudes. For example, evangelical Protestants tend to be more unified than either mainline Protestants or Catholics (Evans, 2002a; Smith, 1998). Secondly, similar to denominations, statistical models using these broader conceptualizations of religious tradition have not always been particularly powerful in their explanatory ability, suggesting that “...something *other than* religious tradition explains most of the difference in these moral attitudes” (Yamane, 2007, p. 43).

Religiosity

Religiosity – again, the devoutness or the importance of religion in one’s life – has explanatory value above and beyond denomination or religious tradition in predicting sociopolitical attitudes. Many of the relationships between religious tradition and political attitudes and behaviors are actually mediated by religiosity, with differences between religious traditions becoming attenuated as levels of religious commitment are controlled. For example, in their examination of abortion attitudes, Gay and Lynxwiler (1999) found that liberal Protestants, moderate Protestants,

whereby Christian privilege has dictated the landscape of the political discussion deciding which issues are considered morality issues and which are not.

³ While non-Judeo-Christian religions have been growing in the United States (Kosmin et al., 2001), the bulk of research on religious attitudes has historically focused on Jews, groups within the Christian faith tradition, and seculars.

non-denominational Protestants, and African American Protestants were all significantly less like to support women's rights to legal abortions than seculars when religious tradition variables were included in a model without a measure of religious commitment. With the addition of the religious commitment variable to the model, however, all of these differences became non-significant, suggesting that devoutness has more explanatory value than does religious tradition. The importance of religiosity has been found regarding attitudes toward abortion (Blasi, 2006), lesbian and gay rights (Hicks & Lee, 2006), and euthanasia (Soen, 2005). Overall, findings suggest that increased levels of religiosity are associated with more politically conservative attitudes.

Everyday Theologies

In research studies on the impact of religion, religious beliefs have often been treated as givens based on the assumption that individuals' beliefs line up with the doctrine of the denomination to which they belong. This, however, is frequently not the case (Moon, 2004; Yamane, 2007). Percentages of doctrine-belief congruence have been found to vary by issue among Catholics (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Meyer, 2001), Presbyterians (Hoge et al., 1994), and even among evangelical Protestants (Poloma, 1989) who have historically had a more unified perspective. In addition to the obvious problematic research implications of equating denominational doctrine with individual belief given the above patterns, treating them as necessarily congruent fails to recognize that denominational members are thinking, communicating, and learning about their faith as they interact with other church members, experience life conflicts, and struggle with tensions inherent in their lived experiences (Dillon, 1999). Likewise, it does not leave open the possibility of doctrinal change (Chaves, 1997) and the role that individuals play in challenging religious institutions to change to meet their needs (Berger, 1969).

To understand the influence of religion on various contemporary conflicts, we must attend to individuals' beliefs or what Moon (2004) terms *everyday theologies*. Everyday theologies are

ideologies that emerge through social interaction with others and while they are influenced by doctrine and scripture, they are also significantly shaped by individual's lived experiences. As Moon (2004) explains, "These theologies are formed in communities and can help people to experience religion as truthful and transcendent rather than as hollow human tradition. People's experiences teach them about life and shape what makes sense to them. In this way, members' understandings of Scripture are shaped by their life experience" (p. 62).

In her ethnographic examination of the discernment process undertaken by two different Methodist congregations on issues of homosexuality, Moon (2004) identifies a number of religious themes that played a central role in the everyday theologies that church members utilized to help them understand their individual and collective relationships with lesbian women and gay men. These themes included ideas about the role of the church in addressing social problems (social gospel), views regarding the sinful nature of human beings, and ideas about pain and suffering, among others. These religious themes intersected in various ways, shaping how people made sense of homosexuality and leading people to arrive at very different conclusions – even though all identified as Methodists, a denomination which has explicit doctrinal policy regarding homosexuality.

Important Religious Themes

The religious themes that comprised the everyday theologies of the church members in Moon's (2004) study are not the only religious themes that play an important role in contemporary U.S. religious thought. As such, themes examined by other scholars of religion are also identified in this discussion. This collection of religious themes can be thought of as a repertoire or cultural "tool kit" (Swidler, 1986) of ideas and scripts that individuals use to construct their everyday theologies. The various cultural scripts do not necessarily wholly determine the everyday theology that will emerge for the individual as they can be deployed in various ways, can be combined in numerous

permutations, and can be used differently in changing contexts. They do, however, limit the possibilities that may emerge – much in the same way that carpenters are limited by whatever tools they have at their disposal. If a carpenter only has a hammer and a saw, but must fix a broken window, their options for how to repair the window are limited by the tools they have in their possession. Similarly, a person armed only with the cultural script that homosexuality is an abomination is going to be severely limited in how they understand lesbian and gay people. It is to these religious themes to which I now turn our attention. I start with an examination of the three religious themes that Moon (2004) identifies, and then suggest six other themes that are important to the American religious landscape, as potential influences on same-sex marriage attitudes.

The social gospel. The social gospel movement is predominately a Protestant Christian intellectual movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Marsden, 1980) that continues to be influential today among mainline Protestant denominations (Bowman, 2007). It applies Christian principles to social problems and provides a religious rationale for religious people to take action to address those concerns. It has been invoked to motivate action to address issues of poverty, public health, education, and immigration, among others. Elements of social gospel ideas are found in the frameworks of many social service and relief agencies, both those associated with faith traditions as well as secular organizations (Scimecca & Goodwin, 2003), and have been deployed in frames used by numerous social movements. Browder (2007), for example, illustrates how religious women used their understanding of theology to shape the mission of the YWCA.

Human nature. One of the most central beliefs in most religious ideologies along with the nature of God, is the nature of humanity (Miller & Delaney, 2005). Some faith traditions building on the concept of original sin, embrace the idea that human nature is fundamentally sinful (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993a, 1993b) with ‘natural’ inclinations toward selfishness and rebellion (Fugate, 1980). Within Christianity, this conceptualization of humanity is particularly embraced within

conservative Protestant religions (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007). Moon (2004) demonstrates how the perception of human nature and its implications for the idea of sin as distance from God's ideal lead some in her study to condemn homosexuality, but the idea of sin as mistreatment of their fellow human beings, led others toward greater tolerance.

Perception of pain and suffering. Ideas about pain – particularly the emotional and spiritual pain experienced by lesbian women and gay men – were used by members of the congregations in Moon's (2004) study both to suggest that the church should affirm homosexuality as part of God's gift of sexuality as well as to suggest that the church should play a role in 'healing' folks from their homosexuality. As a central theme in Christianity, the theme of suffering can be seen playing a role in numerous social movements including the framing of the struggle for justice in Chiapas (Moksnes, 2005), as well as a frame for the issues of pain and sacrifice in the fight against racism for African Americans (Simms, 1999). Numerous studies have also demonstrated a link between people's experience of trauma and suffering, and increased religiosity as a way in which people try to make sense of their painful lived experiences (Moksnes, 2005; Park, 2005).

Moral absolutism/relativism. Absolutism – the belief that moral authority is fixed and unchanging – is a religious theme that has played a role in the intensification of conflict between religious liberals and conservatives both within the same denomination and between denominations (Hoge et al., 1994; Hunter, 1991; Wuthnow, 1988). Evangelical Protestants tend to be the most moral absolutist with a commitment to an external, unchanging God, while religious liberals tend toward a more relativistic notion of morality and reject religious authority as exclusive (Hunter, 1991; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997). The tension between the two perspectives has been influential in religious thought in the U.S., playing a role in opposition to sexually explicit materials (Sherkat & Ellison, 1997), negative attitudes toward euthanasia (Finlay, 1985), and even greater support of free market capitalism (Baker & Forbes, 2006). It has also been argued to play a role in opposition to

lesbian and gay rights (Giroux, 2005; Yip, 2003).

Anti-universalism/universalism. Universalism emphasizes a concern for the welfare of all people, and generally holds that all persons are related to and will be reconciled to God. While most religious traditions claim universalistic goals, most actually practice a circumscribed version that directs the selflessness of universalism only to members of their particular religious in-group (Wuthnow, 1991). Universalist churches, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the common principles of most religions and embrace other faith traditions in an inclusive manner. While significant theorizing exists around universalism, little empirical research has been undertaken to examine its relationship with sociopolitical attitudes. In the one study found, Belo, Gouveia, da Silva, and Marques (2005) found that respondents who were oriented toward universalism were less likely to endorse sexist beliefs.

Accountable freewill individualism, antistructuralism, and relationalism. Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink (1999) suggest that three religious themes of accountable freewill individualism, antistructuralism, and relationalism play an important role in evangelical Christianity in the U.S. Accountable freewill individualism is the notion that individuals have agency in their lives combined with their being solely accountable for their actions and choices. While this belief could theoretically stand alone or be part of a larger sociopolitical ideology for some, in the case of evangelical Christians, this belief is not divorced from their spiritual ideology, but rather "is directly rooted in *theological understanding*..." (Emerson et al., 1999, p. 400 their emphasis), that is, it emerges specifically from their understanding of the sacred.

The second notion, antistructuralism, is a corollary to accountable freewill individualism. Because the individual is seen decontextualized from social structure and viewed to be ultimately accountable for their behavior, explanations for social behavior that rely on structural influences or that minimize individual determination and choice are soundly rejected. Antistructuralism as a

cultural script is reinforced by conservative Protestant theology which views humans as likely to deny their own culpability in their "sin" and to turn elsewhere for someone or something to blame (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993a, 1993b).

The final cultural script of this triad – relationalism – suggests that humans in the wrong interpersonal contexts are likely to make wrong choices. Christian maturity is supported by having a social network of families and friends involved in the church. Social problems, on the other hand, emerge due to "poor relationships or the negative influence of significant others" (Emerson et al., 1999, p. 401).

Emerson and colleagues (1999) demonstrate that all three ideas – accountable freewill individualism, antistructuralism, and relationalism – are deployed repeatedly by white evangelical Christians to justify and legitimize racial inequality. However, in at least one study (Hinojosa & Park, 2004) evangelical Christians did not emerge as more likely to use individualistic cultural scripts to explain racial stratification than other religious traditions.

Perception of forgiveness. Even though themes of forgiveness are central to religious discourse, research has frequently failed to find a relationship between endorsement of forgiveness and actual forgiveness by religious individuals (for example, McCullough & Worthington, 1999). However, Tsang, McCullough, and Hoyt (2005) have argued that the lack of empirical support for the relationship is due to methodological shortcomings. They found, for example, that participants in their sample who had higher levels of retributive and compassionate religious beliefs were more likely to endorse forgiveness for certain transgressions. Likewise, in their examination of beliefs about forgiveness and criminal justice attitudes, Applegate and colleagues (2000) demonstrated that religious individuals who endorsed higher levels of forgiving attitudes were more supportive of rehabilitative approaches to criminal justice, while seeing God as punitive was related to increased support for punitive approaches to crime.

Religion and Same-sex Marriage

In this section, I examine the existing literature regarding the relationship of religious tradition, religiosity, and everyday theologies with same-sex marriage attitudes, as well as, provide some brief suggestions on strategies that might be useful in challenging opposition to or further building support for same-sex marriage within the context of those variables. The suggestions should be viewed as speculative examples given that the relationship between these variables and attitudes regarding same-sex marriage are inchoate.

Religious tradition.

Most studies indicate – in line with attitudes regarding other ‘morality’ issues – that individuals who identify as evangelical Protestants⁴ tend to be the most negative toward lesbian and gay rights. Jews and liberal Protestants as well as seculars tend to be most supportive of all religious groups. Catholics and mainline Protestants tend to fall somewhere in the middle (Cotten-Huston & Waite, 2000; Finlay & Walther, 2003). Strong religious tradition effects have been found on support for same-sex marriage and civil unions in bivariate analyses (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2003), while in the multivariate context, Olson and colleagues (2006) found no differences among religious traditions in terms of support for a federal marriage amendment. They did find, however, that Catholics were less likely to oppose civil unions than mainline Protestants, and that African American Protestants, Catholics, Jews, seculars, and those from other religious traditions were less likely to oppose same-sex marriage than mainline Protestants. In their study, evangelical Protestants did not emerge as significantly different than mainline Protestants, which may have been the result of including variables in their models that captured a ‘moral values concern’ as well as a ‘secular society concern,’ which were likely highly correlated with evangelical Protestantism and obscured the difference between mainline and evangelical Protestants.

⁴ Various studies have sometimes defined this group as fundamentalists, sometimes as conservative Christians, and sometimes as having been ‘born again’.

Even with the above-identified patterns, work toward the legalization of same-sex marriage should be careful not to write off the support of certain religious communities based on the belief that members of those religious communities embrace the doctrinal stand of their denomination or fit within the patterns of the broader religious tradition. While the probability of someone from certain faith traditions (e.g., evangelical Protestant) supporting same-sex marriage may be less than someone from a different tradition with more progressive doctrinal stands (e.g., liberal Protestant), there is still wide variability in attitudes about same-sex marriage within all the religious traditions. One strategy that might be particularly useful for same-sex proponents – especially in religious traditions that have been seen to be more cohesive and negative in their attitudes about same-sex marriage – is to amplify the existence of variability in attitudes regarding same-sex marriage within that tradition. Exposing the lack of cohesiveness within the tradition has the potential to create more space for proponents of same-sex marriage to problematize and challenge their denomination's stance. Simply providing information to denominational members of the existence of pro-lesbian and -gay groups within their tradition of which they may not even be aware could be an initial step. For example, proponents could leaflet cars during a Sunday morning service at the local Baptist church about the existence of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB, 2007), or sponsor lectures by prominent Baptist ministers who support same-sex marriage.

In congregations (or denominations) that are taking a public stand against pro-lesbian and pro-gay policy, Moon (2004) demonstrates that norms about dissent may be at play which can foster the appearance that there is uniform agreement with the stance even when that is not the case. Providing social and political space for critiquing those very norms about dissent – particularly by members within those faith traditions – may foster greater opportunity for voices of dissent to emerge. The political and organizational silencing of dissent is frequently problematic given that many denominations have clear doctrinal stances that support congregational and individual dissent

based on informed conscience (Lopata, 2003; Stricklin, 1999). Illuminating how church doctrine supporting dissent conflicts with the norms as they are practiced is one strategy that could be potentially useful for proponents of same-sex marriage.

Similarly, the assumption that a congregation associated with a historically progressive denomination will be supportive of same-sex marriage could lead to problems whereby activists face resistance where they assumed there would be little. Even in historically pro-lesbian/pro-gay denominations such as the Unitarian Universalists, American Society of Friends (Quakers), and the United Churches of Christ, non-affirming congregations and those that oppose same-sex marriage still exist (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.; Thomas, 2005). Failure to be prepared for that resistance among an audience that is assumed to be lesbian-/gay-friendly, could result in less effective organizing for marriage equality.

Religiosity.

As with religious tradition, high levels of religiosity and religious commitment have been fairly consistent predictors of negative attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men (Lemelle, 2004; Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000) and with decreased support for pro-lesbian/pro-gay public policies (Schroedel, 1999; Tygart, 2002). Tygart (2000; see also Tygart, 2002) examined attitudes toward legal recognition of same-sex relationships and included four different measures of religiosity. In bivariate relationships all four variables were significant predictors of support for legal recognition of same-sex relationships with higher levels of religiosity (greater importance, more frequent attendance, and stronger beliefs) associated with decreased support. However, in the multivariate context, neither the individual measures of religiosity nor a variable combining all four into a single measure continued to be significant. This lack of finding in the multivariate model may have been partially a result of multicollinearity with variables measuring other political beliefs in the models.

In their development of a scale to capture attitudes toward same-sex marriage, Pearl and

Galupo (2007), found – as they predicted – that higher levels of religiosity were associated with decreased support for same-sex marriage, and that the relationship was stronger for women than for men. Similarly, Brumbaugh and colleagues (2008) found that even in the presence of correlates capturing political conservatism, attitudes toward divorce, blaming family breakdown on selfishness, and attitudes toward covenant marriages (all of which were significant predictors), religiosity continued to play a significant role in explaining opposition to same-sex marriages.

Olson and colleagues (2006) utilized a measure of religiosity that captured a wide range of religious activities including formal and informal attendance of religious activities, prayer, reading religious materials, reading the Bible, and listening or watching religious broadcasts, among others and found that higher levels of religiosity measured by the scale were associated with decreased support for same-sex civil unions and same-sex marriage, and decreased opposition to a federal marriage amendment.

As Swidler (1986) has pointed out, the more important certain cultural resources become in people's lives, the more they are relied upon to assist the person in interpreting the world. It is reasonable to assume that people with higher levels of religiosity rely more heavily on the cultural scripts from within their faith traditions than people with lower levels of religiosity do from within their faith traditions. This may also mean that there is 'less room' in the cultural toolkit of more religious individuals for counter-hegemonic cultural scripts. Given the importance of religion in the lives of these individuals, offering challenging cultural scripts that are secular in nature may not be a particularly effective strategy. However, identifying and employing cultural scripts from *within* their religious tradition that conflict with the hegemonic scripts of their faith tradition opposing same-sex marriage may provide more space for the person to re-examine their attitudes and beliefs.

Finally, since the literature suggests that people who have experienced more trauma and suffering in life tend to be more religious (Moknes, 2005; Park, 2005), highly religious people may

be particularly moved by their empathy towards pain that others experience. If we combine these findings with Moon's (2004) argument that the language of pain may be a particularly effective frame that resonates with Christians, it suggests that exposing the emotional and spiritual pain of lesbian women and gay men to people with high religiosity may be one way to motivate change.

Everyday theologies.

Research on the relationship between the religious themes identified in the literature as important in the American religious landscape and attitudes about homosexuality and, more specifically, same-sex marriage is virtually non-existent, suggesting in line with Olson and colleagues (2006) that much work still needs to be done to understand the complex impact of religion on attitudes about homosexuality – including attitudes regarding support for same-sex marriage. Given the historical relationships of the endorsement of certain religious themes with specific faith traditions, future research may be able to identify which religious themes appear to be particularly central in undergirding opposition and support for same-sex marriage as well as other sexuality-related attitudes. Uncovering and understanding these relationships could provide openings for proponents of same-sex marriage to either challenge anti-lesbian and anti-gay stances or to develop pro-same-sex marriage frames that are more likely to resonate with religiously-motivated individuals and groups.

Giroux (2005) and Yip (2003) suggest that one particular religious theme, moral absolutism, plays a substantial role in the opposition to lesbian and gay rights, and given that evangelical Protestants tend to be higher in moral absolutism, this may be one of the underlying themes that explains part of the historically anti-lesbian and anti-gay stances held by many evangelicals. If empirical evidence supports this hypothesized relationship, then the question arises, how might proponents of same-sex marriage use a belief in an unwavering and unchanging moral authority to foster support for same-sex marriage? Two strategies seem to suggest themselves – the first is to

problematize the theology of moral absolutism. For example, the Southern Baptist denomination's history of support for slavery and racial segregation and the use of Biblical literalism to support those policy stances (Melton, 2002; Shurdan & Varnadoe, 2002) can be used to problematize the denomination's commitment to moral absolutism and raise questions about the certainty of religious leaders' *current* authoritative interpretations regarding same-sex relationships. If the denominations' leaders could have been so certain in the past about their Biblically supported stances supporting segregation and slavery, what is to say that they are not – once again – in error? The second approach is to raise the question of which entity is seen as the unwavering and unchanging source of authority. Embedded in this notion of moral absolutism is the idea that there is *an authority*, and most evangelical denominations see this authority as the figure of Christ. Emphasizing the messages of Christ, particularly those of the 'subversive Christ' (Borg, 1994) who challenged legalistic religious leaders and stood in solidarity with the marginalized, may be one strategy for moving some Christians to embrace a moral absolutism that sees the social justice messages of Christ as a central theme. Believing in an absolute moral authority may not, per se, be the source of the opposition to same-sex marriage, but rather it may be to whom or what the person turns to as that *authority* that is much more problematic.

In his exploration of support for legal recognition of same-sex relationships, Tygart (2000) included a variable that captured how much free will was perceived to explain criminal activity in situations of social deprivation, an idea similar to the religious theme of accountable free will individualism (Emerson et al., 1999). Tygart found that greater endorsement of free will (versus determinism) was significantly correlated with decreased support for legal recognition, even when controlling for variables such as religiosity, support for minority rights, and genetic attribution for the etiology of homosexuality. This suggests that accountable freewill individualism may be a significant player in explaining religious opposition to same-sex marriage. Basic education on the

impact of socio-structural influences on human behavior and identity – much like that covered in introductory sociology courses – might provide an opening for challenging the tenacity of accountable freewill individualism and its potential role in opposition to same-sex marriage. The more that evidence and examples of these influences can be embedded in the lived experiences of religious people, the more likely they are to resonate with this audience.

Olson and colleagues (2006) included a measure to capture the closeness of respondent's psychological and emotional ties to their religious congregation by asking how many of the respondent's closest friends were also members of the respondent's congregation, similar to the religious theme of relationalism (Emerson et al., 1999). They found that respondents whose social networks were more integrated into their congregations were more likely to oppose recognition of civil unions and same-sex marriage, even while controlling for both religious tradition and religiosity. However, the relationship was not significant in predicting support for a federal marriage amendment. Rather than seeing the presence of this closely knit community as problematic, same-sex marriage advocates might examine how to mobilize and support insiders in these communities who have more progressive views. It seems likely that external challenges in these communities will only serve to further crystallize attitudes, suggesting that in fairly closed systems, change must emerge from the inside.

In that same study, Olson et al. (2006) also examined the importance of 'moral issues,' and found that those who prioritized moral issues were significantly more likely to oppose same-sex marriage than those who did not. As other scholars have noted, part of the issue with the current conceptualization of what is subsumed under the umbrella of moral issues for those identifying strongly with conservative religion is that it has tended toward a narrow focus on abortion, lesbian and gay rights, and the evils of alcohol and drug usage (Guth, Green, Smidt, Kellstedt, & Poloma, 1997; Hoover, Martinez, Reimer, & Wald, 2002). However, recent voices in the Christian faith

tradition – including that of some evangelicals – have begun to challenge this narrow focus and have argued for a broadening the conceptualization of morality to include issues of poverty, environmentalism, and war (Little, 2005; Wallis, 2006). By allying with progressive voices within conservative religions that are calling for a re-definition of morality, opportunities may arise for re-shaping the landscape of the conversation on same-sex marriage and homosexuality.

Finally, as Moon (2004) points out, everyday lived experiences frequently have significant influence on how people come to construct their everyday theologies and to understand their relationship with lesbians and gay men. Numerous examples abound of Christians who have come to embrace their lesbian and gay children, friends, and relatives including those who identify with faith traditions that have staunchly anti-lesbian/anti-gay stances (Bernstein, DeGeneres, & MacNeil, 2003; McDougal, 2006). The conflict that arises from a lived experience with a loved one who identifies as lesbian or gay and identifying in a religious tradition that is not affirming is an opportunity for a shift in understanding the issue of same-sex marriage. This shift has been recognized on the individual level whereby knowing gay and lesbian people is associated with decreased levels of heterosexism, but has not been adequately mobilized for its potential impact on larger communities. Identifying, working with, and supporting parents and relatives of lesbian women and gay men who have remained within the religious tradition may be one route to foster change from the inside.

CONCLUSION

While religious tradition and religiosity may have some explanatory value regarding attitudes about same-sex marriage, a potentially more helpful barometer of where people stand on the issue could be the everyday theologies that they embrace. While the literature is virtually non-existent in this area (with the exception of Moon (2004)), what does exist suggests a complexity to people's lived religious perspective that is not captured in models that rely solely on religious

tradition and religiosity alone to capture the complex impact of religion on marriage attitudes. Understanding the complexity of a person's everyday theology may provide important cues as to what approach will be more likely to resonate with them. For example, the strategy one might use when in dialogue with a highly religious person who embraces moral absolutism and defines sin as the mistreatment of other humans, could be a frame of the spiritual violence that lesbian women and gay men have experienced at the hands of some religions combined with the unwavering and consistent message of loving one's neighbor that Christ embodied. Similarly identifying and engaging individuals within the faith tradition who place a high value on forgiveness may provide for an opening to shift the dialogue from the hegemonic cultural script that opposes same-sex marriage.

If we embrace the notion that Moon (2004) suggests whereby people's theologies shift according to life experiences and in community with others, then working at the level of these religious building blocks may be one way in which to effect movement in the direction of greater support for same-sex marriage in an indirect manner. This may be particularly true once we have a better understanding of what role these foundational religious themes play in shaping people's sociopolitical attitudes about marriage equality. Social movement organizations may find that the development of strategies and frames that resonate with the endorsement of these everyday theologies may be a particularly effective way of mobilizing support for or neutralizing opposition to same-sex marriage among some people of faith.

As Olsen et al. (2006) noted, there are huge gaps in the existing knowledge about the complex relationship between religion-related variables and support for same-sex marriage. Until scholars document the intricacies of these relationships – paying particular attention to the differential effects of religious tradition, religiosity, and everyday theologies – marriage equality advocates have little foundational knowledge on how to proceed in addressing the religious-based

resistance to same-sex marriage. Extrapolating from the research on religion-related variables and general attitudes about lesbian women and gay men can suggest some potential approaches, however, as Loftus (2001) has demonstrated attitudes about the morality of same-sex sexuality and attitudes about civil liberties have become increasingly disentangled among the American public. This de-coupling may be an advantage for same-sex marriage advocates.

Much work remains to be done in the U.S. (and elsewhere) to increase the general public's support for marriage equality. While appeals to political themes such as equality, fairness, and democracy are no doubt an important part of the strategies that need to be used by advocates and organizations in this task, failure to recognize and address the importance of religious motivations could very well result in a substantial portion of the U.S. populace remaining staunchly committed to the denial of equal marriage rights for same-sex couples, particularly given the importance of religion in the lives of many (most?) Americans. Failure to understand the complexity of religious beliefs and to utilize religious themes in pro-same-sex marriage messages misses strategies that have the potential to resonate with citizens who have, for the most part, been written off by the movement as unchangeable.

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