

# Sexual Prejudice among Christian College Students, Denominational Teachings, and Personal Religious Beliefs

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Received: 23 January 2012 / Accepted: 28 March 2012  
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**Abstract** Although numerous studies have examined the role of religious tradition and religiosity on attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, the role of endorsement of denominational teachings has largely been overlooked, even though such teachings are often cited to explain study findings. To better understand the complex relationship between religion and sexual prejudice, this study explores the unique contributions of religious tradition, religiosity, and individual endorsement of denominational doctrine about same-sex sexuality in shaping these attitudes. Findings indicate that endorsement of denominational doctrine concerning same-sex sexuality is more influential than religiosity, and that endorsement of denominational doctrine is not simply a proxy for believing that same-sex sexuality is a sin. Implications for future research are discussed.

**Keywords** Gay men · Lesbians · Bisexuals · Religion · Denominational doctrine · Students · Bias

The churches, in spite of their self-proclaimed mission of goodwill, peace, and compassion, appear to be reinforcing these negative attitudes [toward sexual minorities] in their youthful members (Finlay and Walther 2003, p. 389).

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Differences in religious instruction or communication underlie such memberships, and the latter in turn dispose adherents to rely upon denominationally specific religious teachings to organize belief systems or to interpret life experiences (Bolzendahl and Brooks 2005, p. 72).

Attitudes toward sexual minorities have become more accepting in recent years (Andersen and Fetner 2008) and important strides have been made in advancing equality for the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community (Elliott and Bonauto 2005; Kollman and Waites 2009; Woodford 2010); however, sexual minorities continue to be stigmatized and discriminated against, and face sexual prejudice (Harper and Schneider 2003; Herek 2000; Huebner et al. 2004; Rankin 2005; Ryan and Rivers 2003). Due in large part to recent large-scale changes in perceptions of and policies affecting marginalized groups, generally (Bachrach et al. 2000; Dovidio and Gaertner 2000; Moya and Expósito 2001) and sexual minorities in particular (Morrison and Morrison 2002; Nadal et al. 2010; Walls 2008), contemporary prejudices are more often manifested through subtle biases rather than overt violence and discrimination. Subtle prejudices, similar to blatant ones, continue to put sexual minorities at risk for an array of physical and mental health problems (Meyer 2003; Silverschanz et al. 2008; Woodford, Krentzman and Gattis 2012; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz and Yu, in press).

Although many societal institutions manifest and perpetuate intolerance and biases toward sexual minorities, religion is often viewed as one of the driving forces behind sexual prejudice (Barret and Logan 2002; Fone 2000) despite most major world religions teaching universalistic goals that express concern for all and that all individuals having a relationship to God. However, as Wuthnow (1991) pointed out, most religions actually practice a circumscribed version of universalism that applies selflessness only to members of their specific religious tradition. In their nationally representative sample, Rowatt et al. (2009) found that strength of religious beliefs was differentially related to different types of prejudice, resulting in selective intolerance. “The role of religion is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice” (Allport 1954, p. 444).

Considerable research has examined the influence of religious denomination or tradition and religiosity on opinions about various social groups, including sexual minorities (Walls 2010; Yamane 2007). As illustrated by the quotations above, researchers have often (naively) assumed that denominational doctrine necessarily reflects individually held beliefs (Walls 2010). This assumption of doctrine-belief congruence potentially overlooks much of the explanatory value of religion in understanding attitudes in general, and sexual prejudice more specifically (Moon 2004; Yamane 2007).

Studies demonstrate that religious individuals in the United States do not necessarily endorse their denomination’s doctrinal teachings about an array of issues (D’Antonio et al. 2001; Hoge et al. 1994), including same-sex sexuality (Moon 2004). This trend also appears to hold true for emerging adults (Smith and Snell 2009). Further, there is evidence that the degree of doctrine-belief congruence varies by denomination as well as by topic (D’Antonio et al. 2001; Hoge et al. 1994). Moon (2004) argues that individuals’ beliefs, although influenced by the

doctrine of their religious tradition, are significantly shaped by the individuals' lived experiences resulting in what she terms *everyday theologies*: "These theologies are formed in communities and can help people to experience religion as truthful and transcendent rather than as hollow human tradition" (p. 62). As young people develop their religious identities, it is common for them to question and disagree with their religion's doctrine around controversial social issues (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Fowler 1981; Smith and Snell 2009).

The concept of syncretism is often used to understand how a particular religious tradition or denomination integrates beliefs and practices from another cultural tradition; for example, the incorporation of indigenous beliefs into Christianity as a result of Christian missionary work and in response to colonization (Jorgenstein 2011; Martin and Nicholas 2010). However, it can also be conceptualized as a process that occurs at the individual level whereby a person may incorporate beliefs, practices, or rituals from another faith tradition or denomination, or may reject some aspects of his/her faith tradition or denomination while maintaining other tenets. This phenomenon of syncretism has been documented as commonplace in the current U.S. religious landscape even among members of conservative religious groups (Dougherty et al. 2009; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Pew Forum on Religion 2009). It is also common among emerging adults (Maher et al. 2008; Smith and Snell 2009). Smith and Snell (2009) found that 52 % of the emerging adults in their sample from the National Survey of Youth and Religion agreed that it was acceptable to pick and choose beliefs within a religious tradition rather than needing to accept all the teachings of the faith tradition, and 56 % reported that it was acceptable to practice religions besides one's own. While sexual prejudice researchers have given some attention to the role of religious beliefs, such as Christian orthodoxy—agreement with Christianity's core beliefs (e.g., Jesus is the divine son of God; Whitley 2009), no study in our review of the literature has specifically examined belief in doctrinal teachings about same-sex sexuality. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature, thereby advancing understanding of the explanatory power of religion on attitudes toward sexual minorities.

In this study, we use syncretism on the individual level as a conceptual lens for understanding the possible disjuncture between the teachings of one's denomination and one's personally held religious beliefs. Our empirical interest specifically concerns how denominational teachings about same-sex sexuality and personal endorsement of those teachings are associated with sexual prejudice; however, the results also help to illuminate the role of syncretism in prejudice, generally. We explore the influence of personal religious beliefs about same-sex sexuality on college students' attitudes toward sexual minorities, specifically using a measure created to assess subtle biases. In doing so, we also inquire about how one's personal beliefs concerning same-sex sexuality affect the contribution of other religion-related factors, in particular the importance of religion in one's life and the frequency of participation in religious services—variables found to be quite influential in earlier research with the general public and college students. In addition to addressing a gap in the literature, this study provides important insights that can inform interventions to foster greater social inclusion for sexual minorities.

For the purpose of this study we engage heterosexual Christian college students who are emerging adults (18–25 years old).<sup>1</sup> We limit our attention to Christian students given the privileges Christians receive in the United States (Blumenfeld 2006; Fried 2007), the long-standing influence of Christian religious institutions in defining romantic relationships (Herman 1997), and the large body of research which has found Christian students to endorse higher rates of sexual prejudice than their non-Christian counterparts (Cluse-Tolar et al. 2004; Finlay and Walther 2003; Gelbal and Duyan 2006; Holley et al. 2008; Hopwood and Connors 2002; Jenkins et al. 2009; Logie et al. 2008; Morrison et al. 2009; Newman et al. 2002; Newman 2007; Schulte and Battle 2004; Siebert et al. 2009). Emerging adulthood is a critical period for identity exploration, including one's religious beliefs and identity (Arnett 2000; Fowler 1981; Smith and Snell 2009). During this developmental period, many young adults question and disagree with the religious doctrine to which they were previously exposed. Attending college may intensify identity exploration as students are often exposed to new opportunities, groups, and ideas (Chickering and Reisser 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005), including topics often addressed within denominational teachings. In addition to formulating their beliefs about controversial issues, such as same-sex sexuality, while in college, students from dominant groups often develop their views about minority groups and tend to reexamine, refine, and incorporate religious beliefs with other beliefs (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). For many individuals, tensions concerning the congruence between denominational doctrine and personal beliefs or desires can surface during this important developmental period (Smith and Snell 2009).

## Background

To contextualize the study, we briefly discuss the teachings about same-sex sexuality of the religious traditions represented in this study. Next, we give an overview of the religious identity stages relevant to emerging adults, including the relevance of individual-level syncretism. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of syncretism. To locate our study in the existing literature about religion and sexual prejudice, then we discuss related studies, including those that have examined religious beliefs.

### Denominational Doctrines Related to Sexual Orientation

A unified Christian view of same-sex sexuality does not exist. Although many Christian institutions do not support LGB relationships (Boswell 1980, 1982; Rogers 2009; Subhi

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<sup>1</sup> Sexual orientation was measured by the question, what is your sexual orientation? To capture variability in sexual orientation, response categories consisted of completely lesbian or gay, mostly lesbian or gay, bisexual, mostly heterosexual, completely heterosexual, asexual, and not listed (please specify). This scale is based on research that demonstrated that human sexuality does not fall neatly into the categories of heterosexual and homosexual (Kinsey et al. 1949). In terms of sexual prejudice scores, exploratory analysis showed that students who identified as mostly heterosexual were significantly different from those who identified as completely heterosexual,  $t(831) = 4.41, p < .001$ . Therefore, we limit the sample to the students who identified as completely heterosexual.

et al. 2011), some affirm same-sex sexuality and some even perform same-sex marriages (Buzzell 2001; Levy 2008). Evangelical Protestant denominations, such as the Southern Baptists (Southern Baptist Convention 1999–2010), tend to hold that same-sex sexuality is a sin, and reject it as a valid ‘lifestyle.’ Mainline Protestant denominations generally are slightly more accepting, but some, for example the United Methodist Church (2008), view same-sex sexuality as contrary to Christian teaching. Yet, other mainline Protestant denominations, like the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America (2009), recognize the diversity inherent in sexuality and promote the value and respect of all people. In fact, current policies within this specific denomination allow for individual congregations to bless same-sex relationships (Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America 2009). The Catholic tradition considers same-sex sexuality to be an ‘intrinsic disorder,’ however it does not view same-sex attraction as inherently wrong and believes that attraction can be managed through celibacy, self-mastery, prayer, and sacramental grace (The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1995; for additional information, see Levy 2008). Although a denomination may hold a specific doctrine, the official doctrine does not necessarily represent the diversity of *actual* teachings within the denomination or within specific congregations (Hunter 1991; Kniss 2003; Van Hook, Hugen, and Aguilar 2001; Wuthnow 1991). This fact reinforces the importance of examining individuals’ understandings of their denomination’s teachings, and their beliefs about those teachings.

### Development of Religious Identity and Syncretism

Much of emerging adulthood is spent exploring and establishing one’s worldview and perspectives as one develops his or her identity (Arnett 2000; Smith and Snell 2009), including religious identity. Theories of religious identity development posit that individuals in emerging adulthood, such as college students, may not fully ascribe to any one religious doctrine, including the religion they have been socialized into in earlier life stages. For some young people, the transition to young adulthood involves identifying as secular rather than being affiliated with a denomination (Smith and Snell 2009). The most well-known religious identity theory, Fowler’s (1981) stages of religious identity development, suggests that individuals generally progress through six stages of faith development: intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individualistic-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing faith. Although these stages are not necessarily tied to ages, synthetic-conventional faith and individualistic-reflective faith appear to be most relevant to college students (typically occurring from puberty/early adolescence to the 20s; Fowler 1981). As will be seen below, syncretism between denominational doctrine and personally held religious beliefs is especially relevant during this latter stage of Fowler’s model.

In synthetic-conventional faith, adolescents and young adults are heavily influenced by the messages they receive from friends, family, school, institutionalized religion, and the media and they rarely examine their ideologies. Consistent with this stage, research indicates that adolescents tend not to rebel against their parents’ religious beliefs (Smith and Snell 2009). As people develop their faith and move to the individualistic-reflective faith stage, they begin to critically examine their identities and worldviews and often experience tensions between individualism and group affiliation. During this stage,

typical of many college students, participation in religious services often decreases (LifeWay Christian Resources 2001–2007), faith becomes highly individualized and skepticism of institutionalized religion grows (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Smith and Snell 2009). Individuals in this stage may, for example, tend to question their religion's official laws and teachings (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), and some may disagree with them and even reject them. A recent study conducted with undergraduate students attending a Catholic university found that across religious traditions, a sizeable portion did not believe it was important to “very strictly follow the official laws and teachings of my religion” (23 % other religion, 24 % non-Catholic Christians, 35 % Catholic; Maher et al. 2008, p. 336). In regard to opinions about LGB people, recent research demonstrates that individuals in this stage may form opinions that differ from those of family, friends, and religious denomination (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010).

Though not prescriptive, Fowler's stages provide a description of the possibilities of faith development over the lifespan, with notions of syncretism being inherent in the individuating-reflective faith stage. Lending support to the concept of syncretism among emerging adults and college students, recent qualitative research conducted with 18–23 year-olds found most respondents believed that the truth claims and practices, including which features of a faith tradition to adopt, should ultimately be chosen by the individual (Smith and Snell 2009).

Consistent with Fowler's theory, numerous scholars conclude that people, including teenagers (Regnerus 2007) and young adults (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009), may not necessarily embrace the teachings of their religion about same-sex sexuality and other moral topics (Dougherty et al. 2009; Maher et al. 2008; Moon 2004; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009; Walls 2010; Yamane 2007; Yip et al. 2011). Yamane (2007) concludes, Americans tend to belong to a religion but they do not necessarily ascribe to the religion's teachings. As individuals learn about their faith and “interact with other church members, experience life conflicts, and struggle with tensions inherent in their lived experiences” (Walls 2010, p. 116), they may develop beliefs that are not congruent with their religion's or denomination's teachings, thus developing a syncretic relationship to their faith tradition. In other words, they may reach the individuating-reflective stage of faith development (Fowler 1981). Therefore, in understanding the role of religion in sexual prejudice, it is pivotal to challenge “the assumption that church doctrine unproblematically represents what members believe” (Moon 2004, p. 12). Yet, sexual prejudice researchers adopt this assumption in explaining results indicating an association between select religious affiliations or traditions as well as religiosity and negative opinions toward LGB people (e.g., Bolzendahl and Brooks 2005; Finlay and Walther 2003; Fisher et al. 1994; Schulte and Battle 2004). To appreciate the intersection of religious factors on sexual prejudice, it essential to consider religious beliefs at the individual level (Walls 2010).

### Religious Antecedents of Attitudes Toward Sexual Minorities

National surveys of the U.S. general public find that identifying with a conservative religion and being very religious are factors associated with more negative views

toward lesbian women and gay men (Herek and Capitanio 1995; Rowatt et al. 2009). Studies conducted with college students, however, provide inconsistent results (Finlay and Walther 2003; Holley et al. 2008; Kim et al. 1998; Logie et al. 2008; Schulte and Battle 2004; Siebert et al. 2009). Although some studies with college students have found significant differences in attitudes that are consistent with what one might predict based on religious or denominational doctrine (e.g., conservative Protestant students reporting the most anti-gay/anti-lesbian attitudes; Finlay and Walther 2003), other results are contrary to such expectations (e.g., no significant differences between Baptist and Catholic students; Schulte and Battle 2004). These collective results reinforce the need to look beyond affiliation and tradition and examine other religion-related constructs.

In trying to understand the nature of prejudice, some scholars have argued that religiosity is more influential than religious affiliation (Allport and Ross 2009; Whitley 2009). Religiosity is traditionally operationalized in two ways: frequency of attending religious services and importance of religion in one's life. These are sometimes referred to as public religiosity and private religiosity, respectively (Eggebeen and Dew 2009). Studies among the general public (Herek and Capitanio 1995, 1996; Whitley 2009) and college students (Finlay and Walther 2003; Jayakumar 2009; Cluse-Tolar et al. 2004; Jenkins et al. 2009; Siebert et al. 2009; Schulte and Battle 2004) generally find that individuals who attend religious services more frequently are less accepting of sexual minorities. A notable exception: Fisher et al. (1994), using a sample of prospective jurors for a civil case concerning wrongful employment termination related to sexual orientation, found that attendance was not correlated with sexual prejudice among the more "gay tolerant" denominations (i.e., "Protestants," Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, and Jews) whereas it was significant in anti-gay denominations (i.e., Baptists, fundamentalists, and "Christians"). Likewise, among non-student samples (Herek and Capitanio 1995; Rowatt et al. 2009; Whitley 2009) and student samples alike (Black et al. 1997; Oles et al. 1999; Jenkins et al. 2009; Whitley 2009), studies have found valuing religion in one's life to be negatively associated with accepting views of gay and lesbian individuals.

In regard to religious doctrine and teachings, other forms of religiosity have been investigated (Whitley 2009; Allport and Ross 2009; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992; Rowatt et al. 2006). Religious fundamentalism ("the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contain the ... essential inerrant truth about humanity and the deity" [Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992, p. 118]), Christian orthodoxy ("the degree to which people agree with the core beliefs of Christianity" [Whitley 2009, p. 22]), and intrinsic religious orientation ("the extent to which people truly believe their religion's teachings and try to live their lives according to them" [Whitley 2009, p. 22]) have each been found to be positively associated with higher degrees of sexual prejudice (Whitley 2009). Among college students, religious fundamentalism, Christian orthodoxy (Rowatt et al. 2006), and religious quest—"open-ended, questioning, and self-critical approach to religion" (Fisher et al. 1994, p. 616)—have been investigated in regard to attitudes toward sexual minorities. However, our review of the literature did not identify any studies that investigated agreement with denominational doctrine concerning same-sex



sexuality. Given their concern for religious teachings and beliefs, it is positive that religious fundamentalism and Christian orthodoxy have been considered; however, it should be noted that these variables tend to assume that one set of Christian teachings and beliefs exist. In regard to same-sex sexuality, as our discussion of the religious traditions represented in this study indicates, considerable variability exists among and within Christian traditions about this topic, thereby questioning the notion of monolithic endorsement of anti-gay/anti-lesbian attitudes as a central defining characteristic of Christianity.

These overall findings coupled with others demonstrating that a sizeable number of college students believe that following their religion's teachings is not very important (Maher et al. 2008) and other research highlighting syncretism in contemporary religion (D'Antonio et al. 2001; Hoge et al. 1994; Moon 2004; Yamane 2007) point to the value of considering not only the degree of religiosity but also the role of denominational teachings and one's beliefs about these teachings. Though existing studies are informative in understanding the intersection of religion and sexual prejudice, they are limited given their lack of examination of personal religious beliefs in relation to denominational teachings about same-sex sexuality (Yamane 2007; Walls 2010). As Walls (2010) poignantly concluded, "this oversight has potentially obscured the possibility that religious tradition, religiosity and endorsement of religious beliefs may all contribute uniquely to attitudes and behaviors... [thereby missing] much of the explanatory power of religion" (pp. 113–114). Considering sexual prejudice in the context of individual syncretism allows researchers to begin to unpack the complexity of the relationship between religious beliefs and attitudes about sexual minorities.

The aim of this study is to examine the complex relationship of religion with sexual prejudice toward LGB people among heterosexual Christian college students who are emerging adults. Specifically, we ask, what are the differential effects of personal beliefs about denominational teachings concerning same-sex sexuality on attitudes toward sexual minorities?

## Method

We draw data from a campus climate study conducted in 2009 at a large public Research-I university in the Midwest. The study explored experiential and attitudinal facets of campus climate, including views toward LGB people. To minimize self-selection bias, recruitment and informed consent materials did not reference sexuality. Students were invited to provide feedback about the campus climate, which was defined as "the actions and attitudes within a university that influence whether people feel welcomed and valued as members of the community." An advisory committee consisting of students, staff, faculty, and alumni assisted with the study, including survey development. The study received institutional review board approval.

## Procedures

An anonymous survey was administered online to full- and part-time undergraduate and graduate students. Distribution procedures followed those used by the university



for its campus-wide student satisfaction and learning outcome surveys. Specifically, using official university email addresses, the registrar's office contacted students three times. An invitation to join the study was distributed and this included a link to the survey website. Reminder emails including a link to the survey were sent 7 and 14 days after the initial email. All messages were signed by the university's vice president of student affairs. All participants were offered an opportunity to enter a raffle for one of fifty \$50 cash cards.

All sophomore and junior undergraduates and 8,000 randomly selected graduate students were invited to participate. Just over 5,000 students opened the survey link. As is common with anonymous internet-based surveys (Dillman et al. 2009) it is unknown if those who did not activate the link actually received/read the invitation/reminder emails. Out of those who opened the survey link, 3,762 students agreed to participate; however, due to missing data the sample was reduced to 2,568. The response rate based on the number of students invited to participate is 13 %. Based on the number of students who activated the survey link, the response rate is 51 %. For this study, the sample is limited to Christian heterosexual domestic students aged 18–25 years ( $n = 665$ ).

As displayed in Table 1. The majority of the sample was female, White, single/dating, Catholic, undergraduate, and registered full-time students. The average age was approximately 20 years.

## Measures

### *Attitudes Toward Sexual Minorities*

After reviewing the literature and consulting with the advisory committee and staff with the host university's LGBT office we constructed the *Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities Scale* (ASMS; see Table 2 for items used in the scale). Prior to using the scale a draft was presented to a group of recent graduates, and adjustments (e.g., wording) were made based on the group's feedback. We wanted a scale that assessed subtle biases, including misconceptions, about LGB people. Although scales examining modern heterosexism are available (Morrison and Morrison 2002; Raja and Stokes 1998), they do not include items on bisexuality, and using multiple scales would add to respondent burden. Moreover, we wanted a scale that reflected prejudices known to exist on the host campus, such as discomfort around persons with atypical gender expression. The ASMS contains seven items, four of which are reversed scored. The items are measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). After reverse scoring appropriate items, scores were summed and averaged to create one's ASMS score. Higher scores represent more affirming attitudes (theoretical range 1–7). Exploratory factor analysis with oblique rotation identified a single factor scale. Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .79.

### *Religious Tradition*

Respondents were asked to indicate the current religion with which they identified, selecting from a list of 22 options, including "not listed (please

**Table 1** Demographics ( $n = 665$ )

Variable			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Attitudes toward sexual minorities			4.80	1.13
Age			20.32	1.98
Etiology of sexual orientation (genetic)			4.05	1.77
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sex				
Female	451	67.8		
Male	214	32.2		
Race/ethnicity				
Black/African American	29	4.4		
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander	42	6.3		
Chicano(a)/Latino(a)/Hispanic	24	3.6		
White/European decent	545	82.0		
Multiracial/other	25	3.9		
Relationship status				
Single/dating	437	65.7		
Committed relationship	209	31.4		
Married	19	2.9		
Divorced/separated	–	–		
University affiliation				
Undergraduate	518	77.9		
Graduate	147	22.1		
Student status				
Full-time	651	98.0		
Part-time	14	2.0		
Religious affiliation				
African American Protestant	14	2.1		
Evangelical Protestant	37	5.6		
Mainline Protestant	178	26.8		
Catholic	284	42.7		
Conservative nontraditional Christian	16	2.4		
Other Christian	136	20.5		
Religiosity (importance)			3.13	0.87
Not at all important	26	3.9		
Not too important	134	20.2		
Somewhat important	234	35.2		
Very important	270	40.7		

**Table 1** continued

	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Religiosity (frequency of service attendance)			2.37	1.51
Never	32	4.8		
Very rarely	241	36.3		
Once a month	116	17.5		
Once every other week	59	8.9		
Once a week	153	23.1		
More than once/week	62	9.4		
My religion's core teachings about homosexuality see it as a sin			4.71	1.41
Strongly disagree	37	5.6		
Disagree	37	5.6		
Slightly disagree	27	4.1		
Slightly agree	107	16.1		
Agree	227	34.1		
Strongly agree	230	34.6		
My own beliefs about homosexuality are fairly consistent with what my religion teaches			3.74	2.08
Strongly disagree	105	15.9		
Disagree	156	23.6		
Slightly disagree	80	12.1		
Neutral	61	9.2		
Slightly agree	71	10.7		
Agree	104	15.7		
Strongly agree	85	12.8		

specify).”<sup>2</sup> This list was taken from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s Freshman Survey, which is administered throughout the country (Higher Education Research Institute 2008). We categorized participants according to a modified version of Steensland et al.’s (2000) schema to include six religious traditions: African American Protestant, evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant,

<sup>2</sup> While the terms *religion* and *denomination* are conceptually different in the academic literature, they are frequently conflated in everyday usage. As such many general population surveys of religion in the United States ask questions such as, “What is your religion?” (Kosmin 1990) or “What is your religion, if any?” (Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture 2001) and receive a wide range of responses including those that are theological in nature (e.g., fundamentalism, spiritual), those that are technically religions (e.g., Jewish, Christian, Buddhist), and those that are technically denominations (e.g., Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Unitarian; Kosmin and Keysar 2009). It is only when respondents fail to identify a denomination, but rather respond with “Christian” or “Protestant” that they are asked a follow-up question regarding denomination. In line with this approach, the original survey asked specifically about the respondent’s religion; however, in this instance and in regard to the two syncretism items we interpret it to mean denomination. This methodological issue has, not surprisingly, been raised as a concern with religion researchers (see, for example, Ellwood and Miller 1992).

Catholic, conservative nontraditional Christian, and other Christian. After finding no statistically significant group differences on ASMS scores, the categories of African American Protestant, evangelical Protestant, conservative nontraditional Christian, and other Christian, were collapsed into conservative Protestant.

### *Religiosity*

We inquired about two aspects of religiosity: the frequency of attending religious service attendance (never [coded 0], very rarely, once a month, once every other week, once a week, and more than once a week [coded 5]) and the importance of religion in one's life (1 = not at all important, 4 = very important).

### *Syncretism*

We asked two questions related to syncretism: "My religion's core teachings about homosexuality see it as a sin" and "My own beliefs about homosexuality are fairly consistent with what my religion teaches." For each item, respondents selected from a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neutral, 7 = strongly agree). Because of the possible ambiguity associated with a neutral response for question concerning one's religion's teachings about "homosexuality," we eliminated the 110 respondents who originally selected this response and recoded the variable (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). To assess syncretism between one's denomination's teachings about same-sex sexuality and one's personal beliefs about those teachings, we created an interaction variable consisting of these two items (more information below).

### *Control Variables*

Demographic controls included age (in years), sex, race/ethnicity, and relationship status. Respondents self-identified their race/ethnicity from a list of six groups, including "multi/bi-racial" and "not listed." Respondents also self-identified their marital status choosing from "single/dating," "committed relationship," "married," and "divorced/separated."

Given the importance of etiology concerning sexuality in earlier research (Haslam et al. 2002; Wills and Crawford 1999; Swank and Raiz 2007), we controlled for this variable, specifically sexual orientation being genetic (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

### *Data Analysis*

We used IBM SPSS Statistics 19.0 for data analysis. Descriptive analyses were conducted for all variables. To identify factors that predict students' ASMS score, we performed sequential linear regression (steps outlined below). This analytical strategy allows us to examine the relative consequence of each independent variable (standardized beta weights) and their consequence beyond the effects examined in earlier steps, and to test the impact of groups of variables on the model's

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics of responses to attitudes toward sexual minorities scale items

Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	M <sup>a</sup> (SD)
1. It is perfectly okay for people to have intimate relationships with people of the same sex.	92 (13.9)	71 (10.7)	57 (8.6)	56 (8.4)	41 (6.2)	153 (23.0)	194 (29.2)	4.68 (2.22)
2. I feel very comfortable around masculine looking women.	15 (2.3)	72 (10.9)	102 (15.4)	117 (17.6)	128 (19.3)	171 (25.8)	58 (8.7)	4.53 (1.59)
3. Lesbians and gay men should not flaunt their sexual orientation in public. (RS)	98 (14.7)	138 (20.8)	88 (13.2)	140 (21.1)	83 (12.5)	74 (11.1)	44 (6.6)	4.44 (1.81)
4. Bisexual people are no more sexually active than lesbians or gay men.	25 (3.8)	34 (5.1)	39 (5.9)	349 (52.8)	40 (6.1)	124 (18.8)	50 (7.6)	4.39 (1.40)
5. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people should be private about their sexual orientation. (RS)	126 (18.9)	195 (29.3)	89 (13.4)	157 (23.6)	51 (7.7)	28 (4.2)	19 (2.9)	5.04 (1.56)
6. When I see an attractive gay/lesbian person, I think "what a waste." (RS)	205 (31.0)	183 (27.6)	59 (8.9)	87 (13.1)	80 (12.1)	36 (5.4)	12 (1.8)	5.29 (1.68)
7. Feminine men make me feel uncomfortable. (RS)	166 (25.0)	213 (32.1)	92 (13.9)	62 (9.3)	93 (14.0)	29 (4.4)	9 (1.4)	5.26 (1.59)

<sup>a</sup> Means for the reverse scored items were calculated so that higher scores indicate more affirming attitudes

RS reverse scored

explanatory power. Multicollinearity was assessed and no concerns were identified. For regression analysis, we dichotomized race/ethnicity (White/European decent vs. people of color/non-European decent) because of low sample sizes among some minority race/ethnicity. We also dichotomized relationship status (single/dating vs. committed relationship/married). Religious tradition was dummy-coded with conservative Protestant as the referent category. Finally, we dichotomized the variable about one's religion's teachings concerning "homosexuality" into not a sin vs. sin because of this variable's unbalanced distribution. The dichotomized version of this variable was used in the interaction item.

## Results

We report descriptive statistics for the independent variables in Table 1.

### Attitudes Toward Sexual Minorities

The average ASMS score was 4.81 ( $SD = 1.13$ ). Approximately 23 % scored in the prejudicial range (i.e., less than 4.00), close to 29 % scored in the neutral range, and the remainder scored in the accepting range (5.00 plus). The responses to the items in the ASMS are presented in Table 2. Here we see sizeable proportions of students selected negatively prejudiced responses (range from approximately 15 % to 33 %,  $M = 29$  %). Neutral responses ranged from 8 % to 53 % ( $M = 21$  %).

### Religiosity and Religious Beliefs

On the whole, religion was somewhat important among our sample ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). Nearly one-fourth of the sample considered religion either "not at all important" or "not too important." On average, participation in religious services was fairly infrequent, about once a month ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ). Just over 40 % of the sample "never" or "very rarely" attended religious services (see Table 1).

In regard to the religious belief variables, an overwhelming majority (85 %) indicated that their religion (denomination) teaches that "homosexuality" is a sin ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.41$  [recall adjusted theoretical range of 1–6]). Almost 52 % of the sample disagreed that their personal beliefs about "homosexuality" were fairly consistent with their religion's teachings ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ).

### Multivariate Results

The first step of the regression analysis included the control variables (age, sex, race/ethnicity, relationship status, and etiology) and religious tradition. These variables accounted for 19 % of the variance,  $F(7, 649) = 4.85$ ,  $p = .008$ . Among the controls, age, sex and etiology were significant. Religious tradition was also statistically significant. More accepting attitudes existed among older and female students than younger and male ones. Further, those with higher endorsement for genetic causation of sexual orientation tended to have higher ASMS scores.

Mainline Protestant students' and Catholic students' attitudes were more affirming than conservative Protestant students' attitudes. Based on standardized betas, etiology made the greatest contribution to the model, followed closely by sex.

In step two, we entered the two religiosity measures. Both were statistically significant; individuals with higher levels of religiosity (both variables) reported less accepting LGB attitudes. With the addition of these two variables religious tradition became insignificant. Age, sex, and etiology maintained significance, with slight changes in the effect sizes for sex and etiology. This model explained 26 % of the variance,  $F(2, 647) = 32.06, p < .001$ .

In the third step, we included the main effects for the two religious belief variables, namely whether one's religion teaches "homosexuality" is a sin and whether one's beliefs are consistent with one's religion's teachings about "homosexuality." Both these variables were statistically significant. The effect size of the first variable was small, whereas the second one was large in effect. Specifically, those whose religion (denomination) taught same-sex sexuality is a sin had lower ASMS scores compared to ones that taught otherwise. More agreement with the statement that one's beliefs were consistent with their religion's teachings was associated with more biased attitudes toward sexual minorities. Adding these two variables caused the two religiosity measures to lose statistical significance. Age and sex retained their statistical significance with slight changes in their effect sizes compared to the previous step. Statistical significance of etiology also endured, however its effect size reduced by one-third. Step three accounted for 44 % of the variance in the outcome,  $F(2, 645) = 97.77, p < .001$ .

The final step investigated whether one's attitudes were moderated by the interaction between one's religion's teachings on "homosexuality" and whether or not one agrees with those teachings. This step explained an additional 4 % of the variance in the dependent variable, representing a significant though small influence on attitudes toward sexual minorities,  $F(1, 644) = 44.75, p < .001$ . Compared to the previous step, all control variables retained statistical significance, with minimal changes in the effect sizes. Among the main effects of the syncretism variables, only religious teachings kept its statistical significance, with a one-fourth decrease in effect size. The cross-product term was statistically significant, indicating that there is an interaction between one's religion's teachings about same-sex sexuality and the consistency of one's beliefs with those teachings. That is, the effect of one's religion's teachings depends on the consistency of one's beliefs with those teachings (and vice versa). The results indicate that the main effect of consistency of one's beliefs ( $B = .00$ ) is the effect of religious teachings when "homosexuality" is not seen as a sin; however, this main effect is not statistically significant in the final model. Therefore, among respondents whose religion maintains that "homosexuality" is not sinful, endorsement of one's denomination's teachings does not significantly influence the level of sexual prejudice. In contrast, the coefficient for the moderation ( $B = -.32$ ) is the additional effect of consistency of one's beliefs when one's religion teaches that same-sex sexuality is a sin. As this suggests, respondents who are affiliated with denominations that teach same-sex sexuality is a sin, the more they agree with these teachings, the more sexual prejudice they hold. The effect size of the moderation variable is notable ( $\beta = -.55$ ) given it is almost



**Table 3** U.S. Christian College students' attitudes toward sexual minorities ( $n = 665$ )

Variable	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3		Step 4	
	B (SE B)	$\beta$	B (SE B)	$\beta$	B (SE B)	$\beta$	B (SE B)	$\beta$
Constant	3.44 (.45)***		4.67 (.47)***		4.98 (.42)***		4.95 (.41)***	
Controls								
Age	.06 (.02)	.11**	.06 (.02)	.11**	.05 (.02)	.08**	.04 (.02)	.06*
Sex (ref. female)	-.58 (.09)	-.24***	-.66 (.08)	-.27***	-.51 (.08)	-.21***	-.48 (.07)	-.20***
Race/ethnicity (ref. White/European decent)	.01 (.11)	.00	.03 (.10)	.01	-.01 (.09)	-.00	-.02 (.09)	-.01
Relationship/status (ref. single/dating)	.10 (.09)	.04	.07 (.08)	.03	.08 (.07)	.03	.08 (.07)	.03
Etiology of sexual orientation	.17 (.02)	.27***	.13 (.02)	.21***	.09 (.02)	.14***	.07 (.02)	.11***
Religious tradition (ref. conservative Protestant) <sup>a,b</sup>								
Mainline protestant	.32 (.11)	.13**	.15 (.11)	.06	.03 (.10)	.01	.01 (.09)	.00
Catholic	.25 (.10)	.11*	.12 (.10)	.05	-.07 (.09)	-.03	-.09 (.08)	-.04
Religiosity								
Importance of religion			-.19 (.06)	-.15**	-.05 (.05)	-.04	-.02 (.05)	-.02
Frequency of attendance at religious services			-.13 (.04)	-.17***	-.03 (.03)	-.04	-.02 (.03)	-.03
Syncretism								
Religion's teaching about homosexuality (ref. not a sin)					-.63 (.10)	-.20***	-.47 (.10)	-.15***
Consistency between religion's teachings and personal beliefs about homosexuality					-.26 (.02)	-.49***	.00 (.04)	.01
Religion's teachings (ref. not a sin) $\times$ consistency							-.32 (.05)	-.55***
$R^2$	.19**		.26***		.44***		.47***	

**Table 3** continued

Variable	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3		Step 4	
	B (SE B)	$\beta$	B (SE B)	$\beta$	B (SE B)	$\beta$	B (SE B)	$\beta$
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>	4.85		32.06		97.77		44.75	

ref reference category

<sup>a</sup> Other Protestant includes African American Protestant, evangelical Protestant, conservative nontraditional Protestant, and other Christian

<sup>b</sup> Exploratory analysis indicated that African American Protestant, conservative nontraditional Protestant, other Christian, and evangelical Protestants were not statistically different in their ASMS scores. However, when comparing African American Protestant, conservative nontraditional Protestant, and other Christian with evangelical protestant overall regression results are similar to the reported results

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

triple that of the next highest effect size (sex  $\beta = -.20$ ). The final model explained 47 % of the variance in respondents' attitudes toward sexual minorities.

## Discussion

This study represents the first examination of syncretism as a covariate of sexual prejudice. Religious tradition and religiosity, especially the latter, are generally considered to be quite influential in explaining sexual prejudice among the general population and student samples. In explaining these findings, researchers have theorized that denominational teachings against same-sex sexuality may contribute to sexual prejudice. However, the influence of denominational doctrine and one's personal endorsement of those teachings have not been empirically examined (Walls 2010), even though contemporary religion among Americans is appropriately characterized as "belonging without believing" (Yamane 2007, p. 40). This research examined a range of covariates of students' attitudes, most noteworthy syncretism in terms of factors related to denominational teachings about same-sex sexuality and one's personal beliefs in relation to these. Syncretism was found to be influential, specifically among students affiliated with anti-gay/anti-lesbian denominations. Given that emerging adults may be reexamining their faith, attending to individual-level syncretism is vital as someone may hold beliefs (or begin to hold beliefs) that differ from the official doctrine of their denomination.

Overall, we find little sexual prejudice among our respondents. The collective average score suggests students are affirming of sexual minorities, but only *slightly* so. Although the majority of aggregate perceptions were not negative for any scale item, a sizeable number of students were either non-affirming or neutral in their responses.

In terms of understanding the explanatory power of religion on sexual prejudice, our results present very interesting findings, especially in regard to syncretism. According to Fowler's (1981) stages of faith, college students/emerging adults may be reflecting on and developing more personalized and individualized faith compared to pre-college days. Essentially, students in these stages of faith development may not necessarily identify with rigid doctrinal stances on LGB individuals (or other topics). College students are often skeptical of institutionalized religion (Arnett and Jensen 2002). Fowler's theory, specifically the developmental tasks that college students may be undergoing, and this documented skepticism reinforce the critical need to empirically examine students' personally held religious beliefs as part of an examination of religion's impact on attitudes toward sexual minorities.

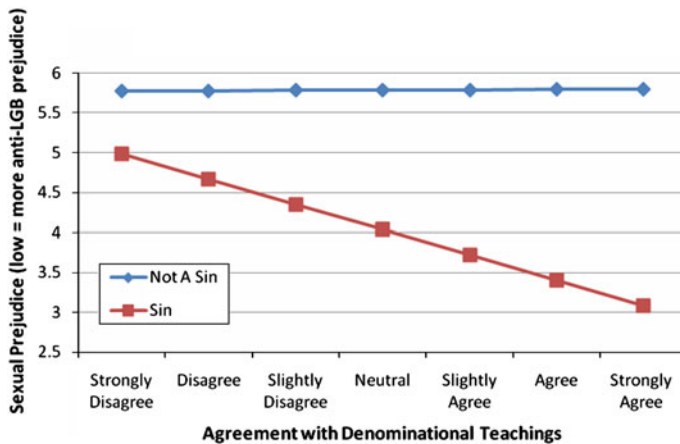
Our results suggest that syncretism is influential in shaping sexual prejudice, even when controlling for religiosity and other variables found to be significant in explaining sexual prejudice. However, we found syncretism to be significant only among those whose denomination teaches that same-sex sexuality is a sin. The line in Fig. 1 that represents the relationship between agreement with denominational teachings and sexual prejudice for those whose denomination does not conceptualize same-sex sexuality as a sin, does not reach a level of statistical significance ( $p = .73$ , model not shown). However, the line that represents that relationship for

those whose denomination views same-sex sexuality as a sin has a steep slope which does reach a level of significance ( $p < .001$ , model not shown). The moderation variable, therefore suggests that if a person's denomination does not see same-sex sexuality as a sin, the individual's level of sexual prejudice is not associated with whether or not she/he agrees with denominational teachings. In contrast, for students affiliated with denominations that profess that same-sex sexuality is a sin, agreement with one's denomination predicts more sexual prejudice the more the individual agrees with his/her denomination's doctrine. In other words, students who do not endorse their denomination's anti-gay/anti-lesbian doctrine are more likely to report more affirming attitudes than their more orthodox colleagues. As we hypothesized, our results indicate that personal beliefs and their relationship with religious teachings (i.e., syncretism) matter, particularly when denominational teachings are not affirming of same-sex sexuality.

The interaction effect representing our measure of syncretism further suggests that it is not simply a proxy for an individually held belief that same-sex sexual orientation is a sin. For if that were the case, we would anticipate that the slope of the line for the degree of endorsement of denominational doctrine would be significant and in the opposite direction for those whose denomination does not teach that same-sex sexuality is a sin. That is, we would expect for people affiliated with a pro-gay/pro-lesbian denomination but who think same-sex sexuality is a sin to report significantly lower ASMS scores (i.e., more biased) than a person who is a member of the same type of denomination and who agrees with the pro-gay/pro-lesbian doctrinal stance of their denomination. This pattern does not emerge, raising a number of questions.

It is possible that denominations with hostile attitudes toward sexual minority people may be actively promoting anti-gay/anti-lesbian attitudes, whereas those with supportive attitudes toward sexual minority people may not be as active in promoting pro-gay/pro-lesbian attitudes. Future studies should consider this. Additionally, in this sample, the vast majority (85 %) of students were affiliated with denominations that taught same-sexuality is sinful; thus this variable may lack the necessary variability to detect a statistical difference, even though approximately 33 % of respondents affiliated with supportive denominations did not endorse their denomination's dogma. Research with larger samples will help to address this concern.

Another interesting finding emerged in regard to religiosity. Extant literature suggests that religiosity is a cornerstone of sexual prejudice, generally (Whitley 2009), and is also influential among college students (Finlay and Walther 2003; Jayakumar 2009; Cluse-Tolar et al. 2004; Jenkins et al. 2009; Siebert et al. 2009; Schulte and Battle 2004). When controlling for demographics and religious tradition, our results are consistent with this conclusion. However, when the main effects of denominational teachings about same-sex sexuality and the consistency of one's beliefs with one's denomination's teachings were entered, both measures of religiosity failed to retain statistical significance. These findings alone (i.e., without considering the interaction) clearly corroborate the observation that in order to understand the influence of religion on sexual attitudes, researchers have to look beyond religious affiliation and religiosity.



**Fig. 1** Interaction effect on sexual prejudice (step 4)

## Limitations and Future Research

Although this study advances understanding of the intersection of religion and sexual prejudice and has numerous methodological strengths (e.g., use of an anonymous survey to collect data about a sensitive topic, no reference to sexuality in recruitment materials in order to minimize respondent bias), there are several noteworthy limitations, some of which future research should address. First, cross-sectional design does not allow causation to be determined. Second, measurement error associated with the respondent and/or the survey instrument is a concern.

Third, although the original study produced a fairly large sample size, the response rate was low and African American students were underrepresented in the original sample. The original survey—a campus climate study—asked about many sensitive issues, such as student academic and psychological wellbeing, and a range of witnessed and experienced negative incidents on campus (e.g., being physically threatened). The attitudinal items followed these questions; thus some participants may have dropped out due to fatigue or psychological distress. Related, the anonymous nature of our design did not allow us to conduct specific outreach with non-respondents or particular demographic groups, and we cannot compare respondents and non-respondents. Fourth, social desirability is an issue; however ensuring anonymous participation helps guard against this.

Fifth, the study was conducted at a large university that prioritizes diversity and multiculturalism in its policies and programs. Therefore, our findings may not be generalizable to Christian students within other institutions, in particular private Christian schools affiliated with conservative religions. Also, on the whole, our respondents had low levels of religiosity. Although religiosity may be low for many college-age populations (LifeWay Christian Resources 2001–2007), this may not be the case in other contexts. Future research is needed to address these areas. It would be especially important to conduct such investigations with non-student populations as college students may not necessarily reflect the general population.

Sixth, concerns exist about the operationalization of Christian denominations in that some measures did not capture diversity within certain denominations (e.g., “Baptist” was listed rather than Southern Baptist and African American Baptist). Future research should allow participants to identify with specific denominations like Southern Baptist.

In addition to addressing these limitations, future research should examine congregation-level messages about same-sex sexuality since specific congregations may promote messages about same-sex sexuality that differ from denominational doctrine. Moreover, studies should investigate possible differential impacts between denominational teachings about sexual identity versus same-sex sexual behaviors. This would enable researchers to understand situations in which two separate belief systems are present in religious dogma. Connected to religious beliefs, future studies would benefit by including other religious measures, such as literal Biblical interpretation, fundamentalism, intrinsic/extrinsic spirituality, and orthodoxy.

Finally, research is needed that delves into the nature of syncretism, including the processes that contribute to its development. For instance, from a psychological stance, it would be important to examine the cognitive dissonance that may occur when a young adult begins to challenge and think differently from the denominational doctrine to which he/she has been socialized (Burns 2006; Ford 2009). Furthermore, other research should investigate the social processes that contribute to syncretism. Moon’s (2004) work on everyday theologies may be helpful here as it highlights the pivotal role that everyday lived experiences play in creating one’s understanding of doctrine and scripture, which may vary from official stances.

## Conclusion

Calls have been made recently for an analytical lens that examines personal religious beliefs, along with religiosity and religious affiliation (Walls 2010; Yamane 2007). We have attempted to respond to this call in this study by using the concept of syncretism to acknowledge and examine the complexity of these religion-related variables. We found that syncretism proved to be an important predictor and its inclusion differentiates this study from previous research. Given skepticism among college students toward institutionalized religion and their tendency to hold more individualized religious beliefs (Arnett and Jensen 2002), understanding their personal religious beliefs about religious doctrine is pivotal in understanding the nature of sexual prejudice among religiously affiliated students. Our findings should caution researchers interested in sexual prejudice among college students and other groups not to examine the impact of religion on sexual prejudice without looking specifically at individually held religious beliefs.

As noted elsewhere (Walls 2010), advocates for greater equality for sexual minorities should be wary of assuming that religiously affiliated individuals—particularly young people affiliated with conservative denominations—are not supportive of lesbian and gay people and rights. Given the prevalence of conservative Christians in the United States, engaging their support may be the key to future long-term success for the equality movement, and from these results

and findings from other studies with millennials (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010), that success may be quickly approaching.

**Acknowledgements** Funding to support this study was received from the National Center on Institutional Diversity, University of Michigan; Curtis Center, School of Social Work, University of Michigan; and Office of the Vice President for Research, University of Michigan. Since thanks to the advisory committee and Spectrum Center staff. An earlier version of this study was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Social Work Research, January 2012, Washington, DC. Thank you to Alex Kulick for his assistance with the preparation of this manuscript. We thank the advisory committee, LGBT office staff, and the anonymous reviewers.

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