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## **Empathy and Its Effect on Religious Opinion Regarding Homosexuality**

**Melissa Borah**

### **Abstract**

In the past few decades there has been a dramatic shift in opinion regarding the treatment and equality of lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. Specifically among religious people, society is more likely to accept and sympathize with this group of minorities today than they were 100, even 50 years ago. After making that observation, the question then arises as to why this change has happened so suddenly; the factors that went into this shift, and what that means for future implementation. Research up to this point has largely been studies regarding the shift itself, not the personal reasons behind it. I try to take this topic further and examine not only the mere presence of a shift in opinion, but the actual reasoning behind it, asking the question, "What made you change your mind?" After asking several Christian-identified Americans, I have seen that the shift occurs most likely and dramatically when the subject has a loved one come out as LGBT. Empathy is the most powerful driving force that can cause someone to rethink their opinion and oftentimes completely change their mind.

### **Introduction**

It should come as no surprise that a large amount of the population still opposes same-sex marriage and same-sex unions. Like the civil rights movement of the 1950s, the world is now more aware than ever of the divided thinking on this topic and human rights in general. Of the population that disagrees, most are religious affiliated, meaning they are involved in church, and identify as Christian, Catholic, etc. Their beliefs are what drive their decision to condemn

homosexuality. However, in recent years there has been a shift in thinking regarding this topic, and many people, even highly religious people in power, have changed their stance from strongly opposed to same-sex marriage to strongly in favor of it. One recent example is Pope Francis who has a much more tolerant view of the gay community than his predecessors. This affects the overall population in several ways, because homosexual hate crimes and tensions have been a very real danger all over the world. If religious leaders are changing their minds, it is very likely that their congregations will be influenced by them and this will create a more accepting and loving environment for everyone, not just those in the LGBT community. What has caused this dramatic change in thinking, and why is it happening now as opposed to 50 years ago? Understanding this phenomenon could give us an insight into human nature and possibly give us hope that one day all humans can live peacefully together.

### **Statement of the Question and Argument in Brief**

What caused the recent, dramatic shift in opinion towards the LGBT community by those who have strong religious backgrounds and beliefs? What has made religious people, and even leaders, rethink their traditional, long-held opinion that same-sex activity and marriage is not condoned in their religion? Since the beginning of religious institutions, there has been much debate over who to include, who to exclude, what the rules of the religion are, and what devout followers must do to remain faithful and respected in the community. In my research I looked at those who identify as Christians. They could be from any denomination within Christianity, but I tried to predominately look at the strictest, most fundamental sects, as those would provide the most dramatic and unexpected shifts in opinion. Among the people I surveyed/interviewed, several are Southern Baptists who previously condemned the LGBT community, but now take a different stance. I asked them to explain what it was that caused this shift in beliefs. Nearly nine

times out of ten, the reason was empathy. They explained that when they met an LGBT person, their initial reaction was that their loved one did not fit the profile the church had originally instilled in them. After creating personal relationships with LGBT people, they learned that they were no different from anyone else, religious or not, and this topic deserves a second look by religious leaders. I'm interested in how empathy is more widespread today than it was 50 years ago, because of things like the internet and globalization.

### **What We Know About This Topic**

There is a great deal of research done on the dramatic shift of opinion among religious people regarding same-sex marriage. Most studies involving this topic simply show that there is a positive correlation between religious affiliation and non-support for the LGBT community (Gerstmann, 2004). It is very clear that "religious variables play powerful roles in structuring attitudes about same-sex unions" (Olson, Cadge, Harrison, 2006). This was obvious in the 2004 presidential election between George W. Bush and John Kerry where 22% of the electorate claimed to be strongly motivated by moral or religious values (Lewis, 2005). The Kinder Houston Area Survey conducted a survey in 2009 to see what a small sample of the population showed when comparing religious people who have close gay friends and those who do not. They found that Protestants are 35% more likely to support gay marriage, if they have a close personal friend who identifies as LGBT. It is important to keep in mind other factors that could influence a person's opinion on gay marriage. There are things such as race, class, education and age that can have a significant influence on opinion (Brewer, 2003; Herek, 2002). A lot of surveys and studies conducted on this topic are typically small in scale and limited in the variety of the sample size. For example, there are a few surveys done that are specifically restricted to college campuses. Young people tend to be far more liberal and open to change than older

people, therefore I purposefully asked a variety of people from various walks of life.

In 2012, Dodaj et. al. found that empathy among adolescents decreased the likelihood that they would participate in bullying behavior. They found that the more someone personally knew a bullying target, the more they would defend that person. The idea of empathy, understanding and sharing in the feelings of others, and how it overcomes negative behaviors can be applied to my question of why some people change their minds on the acceptance of LGBT members.

### **Empirical, Historical, Process Background**

As I stated earlier, there has been tension between the LGBT (lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender) community and religious affiliations since organized religion existed. In my research I specifically target those who identify as Christians and go to church regularly. This is what I mean by “religious people.” Religious people in American history not only rejected LGBT people, but they rejected the disruption or change of gender roles in general. In her book, Christian author Kathy V. Baldock explores this topic and the dramatic and highly emotional world of the early 1900s on. She says that one of the major events that solidified this cultural gap was World War II. It had a profound effect on the relationship between LGBT people and the highly Christian American world. She discusses how war efforts worked to weed out “effeminate” men because they were not welcome in the army as they were seen as weak. There was a shortage of soldiers which allowed women to join the military in 1942, which came with a resistance to “mannish” women, and what that meant for the “traditional American family” which was based on religious values and morals. Baldock suggests that this was the first real “eye-opener” to how the general American public responded to sexual minorities. Post War times brought the baby boom, and along with it the reordering of gender roles in society (which

the war had messed up). For most Americans, they pointed to the Bible as a reason to condemn LGBT people and keep them out of the church, the army, workplaces, and society in general.

Same-sex sexual activity was not legal nationwide until 2003 (*Lawrence v. Texas*). Even with the law steadily favoring the LGBT community from the 1970's onward, conditions have often been dangerous for openly gay men and women. For that reason many chose (and still choose) to hide their identity and marry the opposite sex for fear of being found out. In regards to the church, "reparative therapy" was the norm until the early 2000s. This involved therapy to "change" someone's orientation, even though the American Psychiatric Association declared homosexuality was *not* a mental illness in 1973. As of this writing, gay marriage is legal in 35 states. It is clear that people are changing their minds about the issue, and this is apparent among religious leaders as well. Because the United States is a more favorable environment to come out of the closet, more people are doing so, which in turn means that more people *know* of someone who is LGBT, which is the reason for this shift in thinking among politicians and religious people. Though there is still work to do in terms of equal treatment and respect for LGBT people among religious affiliations, there is something to be said about the number of affirming religious people now than there were in the 1940s.

### **Hypotheses and Test**

It is clear from my historical analysis that there has been a change in thinking in regards to homosexuals. Not only is it "legal" to be gay, but American are seeing an increase in the number of LGBT members in church settings and leadership positions. The only sensible explanation for this drastic shift is that more people are coming out, sharing their experiences, and showing that homosexuals are like the average American, separate from traditional stereotypes of being sex offenders or perverts. To test the hypothesis that empathy is the reason

behind widespread acceptance, I have utilized social media, personal contacts with recently affirming pastors, and first-hand accounts of average citizens. If my hypothesis is correct, the majority of these interviews will include some personal story about a loved one coming out, or a famous LGBT member speaking on behalf of his or her community, or some other personal interaction with a homosexual by someone who considers themselves religious. If I am correct, then America will continue to see drastic acceptance for LGBT persons and their right to marry, adopt, etc. As more Americans come out of the closet, more religious people will come in contact with them, to realize that they are “normal” and result in rethinking their original opinion.

### **Cases, Data Sources, Measures, and Controls**

Because this topic relies on opinion and personal experience, my first task was to generate an appropriate data tool that asked religious people (defined as someone who identifies as a Christian and attends church on a regular basis) to discuss the process they experienced while going from non-affirming of LGBT people affirming LGBT. I decided to utilize the internet and social media platforms because it is very difficult to find a large number of religious gay-affirming people all in one place. I wanted to make sure my sample included people from all demographics and backgrounds, because what I’m looking for is the most frequent and influential factor among religious people in general. I decided to look on Facebook to see what kind of groups there were that fit my criteria. I found one group who call themselves “Just Because They Breathe” which consists of hundreds of religious people who now agree that gays and lesbians should have full respect and equality under the law, and even in churches and family settings. “Just Because They Breathe” is like an advocacy group for straight allies to participate in events, discuss important topics and generally do what they can to support the

movement.

To start my project I gave a brief introduction of who I was and what I was seeking to accomplish. I told participants that I was interested in finding out what the main factors were that made them change their opinions. I operationalize the term “affirming” by agreeing that LGBT people should have full rights under the law, be allowed to adopt and marry, and be seen as completely equal members of society. To measure this I first presented a simple open-ended question which asked members of the Facebook group to explain the process they undertook and asked them to email me with their responses. After receiving a group of emails and sorted through each variable, I took the most frequent factor (personal contact with a member of the LGBT community), and asked a separate group of people if they agreed this was the beginning of a crucial turning point that starts as more people come out of the closet. I then found a group on Facebook that is specifically Christians who identify as gay. I posted a question to them asking “How many of you had a family member that was anti-gay before you came out, but is now pro-gay?” and the responses were overwhelmingly positive, that familiar contact with a gay person changes the opinion, or at least alters the thinking, of religious individuals.

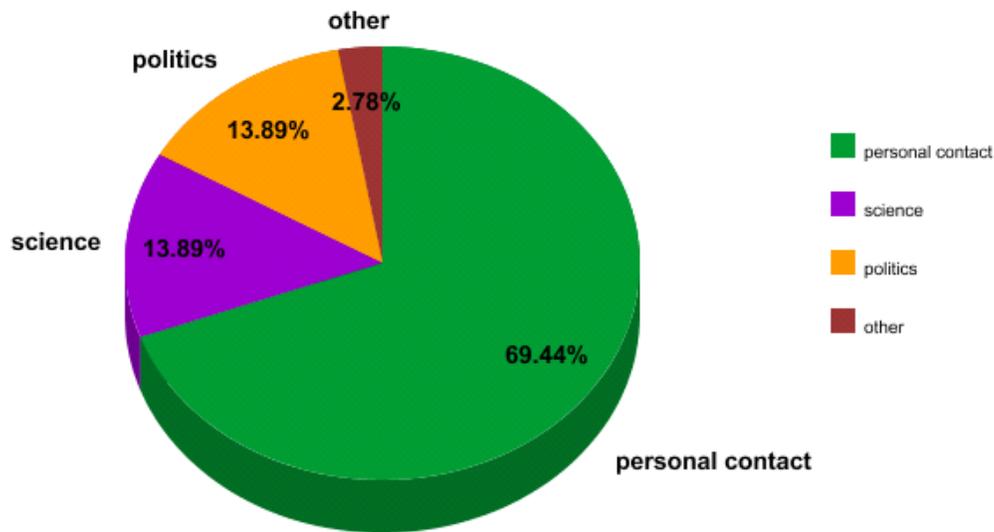
### **Model and Analysis**

In total I received thirty e-mails, all with long, in-depth and personal accounts of what it took for that person to start on one extreme and end up on the other. Although, there were several variations of responses, twenty-five out of the thirty stories had one thing in common: the person knew someone who was gay, saw someone famous whom they respected come out as being gay, or had friends that were allies. All of the stories started similarly with them explaining how they had grown up in a fundamentally Christian home. They were all raised to believe being gay is a sin and an individual choice. Therefore, as they entered adulthood, they each had set opinions on

the topic, and would have defended their views readily to a stranger. The factor that brought them to rethink their opinion was the presence of someone they had contact with, whom they knew fairly well and were not perceived as someone the church would stereotype as homosexual, meaning they were not sexual deviants, perverts, nor people looking for attention. After noticing this pattern, I interviewed a Southern Baptist pastor who had recently made the opinion shift. He told me that until he had someone he loved and knew come out, he was never forced to look at this topic from a different perspective. In his words, "It is too easy to believe what you've always been told until something doesn't sit right. The thing that didn't sit right with me was knowing this person did not fit the standards and stereotypes, we as Christians think of when we think of homosexuality."

One lady who responded by email wrote about her gay daughter. She explains it by saying, "She and I have always been very, very close and connect extremely well on almost everything. I can read her heart and she can read mine. So when she came out, I knew this was truth for her and not something she was 'rebellious' against." This was echoed in almost all of the data I collected with people saying things like "I realized that no one would choose to be this way. They had to be born this way. And I'm not going to question God and why He made my son that way." Other factors included the political climate, like what politicians were saying. There were also about five responses that said science and recent scientific discoveries that people are born gay played the most important role in their transition from non-affirming to affirming, but even they had a personal relationship that influenced them substantially.

Factors that cause religious people to change their mind about homosexuality



*It's important to note that at least 50% of the respondents who said science and politics played the largest role also had personal relationships with people who were gay.*

## Discussion and Conclusion

Dodaj et. al. (2012) found a negative correlation between empathy and involvement in bullying others (95). The same is true when applied to the gay community and religious affiliations. Although, most would not consider rejection from the church as a form of "bullying." However, the long-lasting negative effects on the victims are very similar, and it is the same idea as ostracizing a group of people. It is clear from both their study and mine that it is much easier to ignore the plight of a minority of people, when one is disconnected from them. It is human nature to empathize with others, so the more connected the world becomes, the more likely it is that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people will influence allies and will gain the basic human rights enjoyed by the majority.

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