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The Controversy

THIS BOOK REPORTS OUR RESEARCH on the possibility of change of homosexuality orientation via religiously mediated means. In offering this report we anticipate that we are stepping into the very eye of a "perfect storm."

Homosexuality is controversial. The possibility of fundamental change in sexual orientation, that homosexuals can become heterosexuals or in any way cease to be homosexuals, is controversial. The question of whether the attempt to change sexual orientation is harmful is controversial. Religious conservatism, specifically what some would call Christian fundamentalism, is controversial. The social-scientific measurement of religiously mediated change ("healing") is controversial. Social-scientific research conducted from an explicit faith perspective is controversial. The possibility that a faith perspective can contribute something of value to the scientific enterprise of trying to better understand human experience is controversial.

The present study touches on all of these hot-button issues and more.

The Exodus Project reported here was directed at answering two simple questions: (1) Are the claims of a cluster of conservative religious ministries valid that homosexual orientation can be "healed"? In other words, is it *ever* possible for an individual who has a homosexual orientation to change that orientation via religious means? (2) Is the attempt to change harmful, as so many today claim?

About four decades ago and earlier, the majority wisdom of the leading professionals in the mental health community was that homosexuality was a psychological disturbance of some kind that could, though perhaps with difficulty, be treated successfully, resulting in satisfactory readjustment to heterosexual experience and satisfaction. In the 1970s and 1980s a rapid if not unanimous shift in professional opinion occurred, stimulated by events

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beginning in the 1950s and earlier, such that homosexuality was no longer viewed as a psychological disturbance or mental illness. Further, fundamental change in sexual orientation began to be generally viewed as unattainable, and slowly the view took hold that any attempt to produce change was necessarily harmful, perhaps profoundly so. This shift in professional opinion never reflected the unanimous view of the mental health professions. When the majority viewed homosexuality as a psychological disturbance amenable to change via therapeutic means, there was always a minority that questioned that majority opinion. And now, when the pendulum of opinion has swung decisively in favor of the view that homosexual orientation is *not* a psychological disturbance and is *not* amenable to change via therapeutic or any other means, a minority of dissent exists within and outside of the professional community, believing that change is possible. This Exodus Project reports on a scientific study of a community outside of the typical professional mental health world that claims that change in sexual orientation is possible via religious means.

This lack of unanimous perspective on the possibility of change has not deterred the American Psychological Association, our professional organization, from asserting an absolute answer to this thorny question. On their public affairs website, "Answers to Your Questions About Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality," the APA claims "Can therapy change sexual orientation? No. . . . [H]omosexuality . . . is not changeable."[1] This is an absolute claim, which leads us to philosophy of science.

From the beginning we wish to emphasize a fundamental point of logic, one expounded by Karl Popper over half a century ago and that is profoundly relevant to the present study.[2] Popper was the proponent of falsificationism as the fundamental rule of adjudicating scientific claims. The logic of falsificationism is easily grasped with the following illustration. The universal claim "All crows are black" is impossible to prove. Why? Because the discovery of a thousand black crows, of a million black crows, of a trillion black crows, can never prove the *universal* claim that *all* crows are black. A nonblack crow might be just around the next corner, no matter how many black crows we document. On the other hand the documentation of *even one case* of a crow that is *not black* disproves the universal claim that all crows are black. In other words, the universal claim "All crows are

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black" is easily *disproved* by one contrary instance, but that same statement can actually never be conclusively proved no matter how many confirming cases are documented. Based on this logical observation, Popper proposed that the fundamental task of scientific inquiry was the falsification, the disproving, of scientific claims by the discovery of contrary evidence. Popper proposed that science would progress by weeding out bad scientific theories by disproof, by offering evidence contrary to the theory.

Popper's approach has many flaws and has not carried the day as a *comprehensive* model for scientific adjudication, but his fundamental point about the power of contrary evidence to disprove universal claims remains indisputable. It is for this reason that *falsifiability* remains an important criterion for scientific theories. As we write, for instance, controversy swirls around the evolution versus intelligent design argument, with critics of the intelligent design hypothesis noting that its proponents have yet to advance a falsifiable experimental proposition.

The relevance of this illustration to the current study is this: We are investigating the claim, widely made today, that sexual orientation, homosexual orientation in particular, cannot be changed, that it is immutable. We are doing so by studying a group of individuals who, with varying motivations and levels of commitment and by varying means, are seeking to do what is commonly regarded today as impossible: to achieve fundamental change in their sexual orientations. If we take the fundamental principle of falsifiability seriously, then *compelling evidence that even one individual demonstrates fundamental change in sexual orientation will constitute an invalidation of the universal claim that sexual orientation change is impossible.* Compelling evidence, on the other hand, that not a single individual in this study makes this change would be consistent with the universal claim that change is impossible and would be evidence in support of this claim, but would not prove this universal claim. We will document the claims of the immutability of homosexual orientation as well as how prior claims of changes have been explained (i.e., explained away) in chapter three.

It is equally important to be clear from the beginning about what this study does not claim or establish. First, the documentation of significant change for some in this study will not establish that permanent, enduring change has occurred; only a very long-term study can demonstrate that.

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Individuals who give evidence of significant change may, in fact, revert to prior patterns of sexual attraction and action five, ten or more years after this initial study. We hope to continue to follow our sample and provide such evidence. The evidence offered here looks at a significant span of time, but we could always examine a longer time frame.

Second, if some but not all of the 98 individuals who completed the initial assessment for this study demonstrate significant change, this study will provide no conclusive evidence about *what proportion* of individuals can change. Why? Because answering the question of probability of success would require a study examining a *scientifically representative* sample of all persons who experience homosexual attraction. We do not, however, have such a scientifically representative sample in this study. This is a ubiquitous problem in research on homosexuality—no one really has any idea of what such a representative sample would look like, and no study can really claim to have produced such a sample, for the simple reason that there is significant disagreement over how to define who "counts" as a "homosexual" and because there is so much controversy swirling around the subject that certain people will come forward or hang back from being studied for a variety of reasons.

Note, though, that *any* sample that includes such persons who show change is adequate to refute the universal claim that change is impossible. An unflattering analogy will show this clearly: If we start with the universal claim that All White Americans accept the full intellectual and social equality of African Americans, we can disprove this universal by interviewing the membership of an obscure Ku Klux Klan cell in rural Illinois and documenting their racist beliefs. But that study of a Klan population would not allow us to claim that all or most white Americans harbor racist beliefs. To make any such normative claim about "X% of the population thinks Y" requires that we study a representative sample of Americans. The main point? Refutation of an absolute claim (such as "sexual orientation change is impossible") does not require a demonstrably representative sample.

This study examined a group of individuals at least somewhat representative of persons taking part in their respective Exodus ministries. At the time we initiated this study, Exodus had about ninety ministries in the United States. We sought the participation of ministries based on their

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geographical proximity to sites where we could establish interview teams, so a subsample of Exodus ministries were contacted based on location rather than representativeness. Of the ministries contacted, a number declined to participate by referring participants to us, and this introduces further unknown variation in our sample. Of the ministries that agreed to participate, some referred all of their participants to us (as described later) while others clearly referred only a sample, again introducing unknown variation in our sample. Some of the most influential studies ever conducted on homosexuality (e.g., the iconic studies by Evelyn Hooker, Alfred Kinsey, Bell and Weinberg, and Bailey and Pillard)[3] have presented conclusions based on *convenience samples,* samples of no known representativeness. We believe that our sample is a fair representation of religiously motivated individuals seeking sexual orientation change, but of completely unknown representativeness of all homosexually oriented persons. Thus, we regard the sample in our study to be better than a mere convenience sample, but cannot argue for complete representativeness of the sample.

Why belabor these points? We do so to establish unequivocally and explicitly the core goals of this study. Our principal goal is to test the universal claim that sexual orientation is unchangeable and immutable, and secondarily to test the claim that the attempt to change is always harmful. It should be noted, though, that the very thought of attaining an "indisputable refutation" is ridiculous, as we live in an age and are investigating a topic area in which anything and everything may be disputed. We have sought to conduct a study by high professional standards, and are determined to report the results of that study honestly regardless of the outcomes. We are confident that these results will be important in understanding the question of change of sexual orientation; specifically, is change possible and is the attempt harmful?

We begin though with a discussion of the relationship of science and religion. Many would claim that religion can and should have no contact with science, and claim further that the matter of sexual orientation is a scientific topic that should be uncontaminated by connection with religion. For such a person, many aspects of the current study will stand as an offense against the supposed "wall of separation" between science and religion: the religious motivation for change of many of our participants, the

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religious nature (though profoundly mixed and complex) of the change mechanisms employed, the mixing of measurement of religious motivation and development with the measurement of sexual orientation and other behavioral matters, and the fact that the principal investigators are themselves evangelical Christians with sympathies toward the possibility of change, whose motivations for conducting the study are in some senses religious and who celebrate certain types of connections between religion and science in the fundamental conceptualization of the study. So it is with an examination of these issues that we begin.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

The study of human sexuality is a case study in the dialogue between science and religion. We believe that religion has much to say about human nature, including sexuality as one aspect of human experience. Likewise, we believe that the behavioral sciences, as applied to the study of human sexuality and sexual behavior, have much to say about those aspects of human experience that science can measure and describe. The interests of both religion and science in advancing our understanding of the fascinating and complex topic of human sexuality will be advanced, we would argue, by a sustained and rich dialogue between science and religion.[4]

As we have suggested elsewhere, there are those who argue that science and religion ought not be in any kind of dialogue.[5] The very nature of science and religion, they would claim, makes such a dialogue meaningless. These arguments take differing forms, from the more extreme claim that religion (particularly Christianity) and science have been and are necessarily at war, to the more modest claim that the shift away from a religious worldview and toward a scientific one, the movement that has often been called secularization, has benefited scientific inquiry.

We would distinguish these claims into two classes, the first being a set of historical claims that religion and science have been "at war," and a second set of claims that religion and science are by their basic natures incompatible. We will only comment briefly on this first argument and then treat the second a bit more extensively. The first argument has been thoroughly refuted by such outstanding work in the history of science as that of John Brooke and David Lindberg who have shown that science and religion,

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generally, have not been "at war," and that religious belief and practice have served in certain cases to facilitate the progress of science.[6] Many superb scientists in fact have been and still are conventionally and devoutly religious, and have themselves seen their religious faith facilitate their work as scientists. On the other hand, many of the claims made about the warfare of science and religion have in fact been based on shoddy historical analysis.

Are science and religion so fundamentally incompatible that in fact no dialogue between the two is even possible? It has been common to argue that religion can have no meaningful relation to science except when religion is an object of scientific scrutiny.[7] The major arguments for this view include the claim that religion and science are two very different and non-overlapping human activities. Religion, it is claimed, is based on subjective experience and personal belief and faith, whereas science is based on observable, measurable data so that truth claims can be tested and verified. Science, particularly in its positivistic conception, is seen as resting on empirical facts that are fixed in meaning and do not need interpretation. Remnants of these positivistic roots of science remain and can be seen in the assumption that the scientific enterprise involves developing theories that are derived from empirical findings and then tested empirically, and that it is the accumulation of facts that moves scientists toward closer approximations of what is really true and knowable.

Religion and science are often said to be directed at utterly divergent purposes as well. It has been said that religion asks and attempts to answer many questions of ultimate concern, for example, about what it means to be human, about ethics and about the meaning of life and future existence. Science, in contrast, is said to be focused only on tangible explanations of physical phenomena.

But these are not accurate characterizations of either science or religion. Advances in our understanding of philosophy of science have demonstrated that data are theory-laden and thus sorted based on our own preorienting conceptions of one sort or another. Scientists do not come to the data in an utterly objective fashion, free from their own preconceived notions of what they are observing or analyzing. Rather, we classify data according to the theoretical views we bring to the scientific experiment, as when the Skinnerian behaviorist counts bar presses by a rat (because that

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is the behavior that her theoretical commitments tell her, with some rational justification, are data) and ignores other aspects of the behavior of the rat. In addition, theories are actually underdetermined by facts, meaning that the "shape" of the facts do not force the conclusion in favor of one theory to the exclusion of all other theories. By implication then, induction upward from the "raw data" is really not the foundation for theory development as was once asserted, but scientists tend to commit themselves to theories long before they scrutinize all of the relevant data. Finally, falsification of theories in science has also been shown to be much more difficult than positivists have claimed, because empirical assessment of a theory always addresses not just the claims of the theory itself but also an innumerable number of corollaries (that one's instruments are working properly, that the test tubes are clean, etc.).* Philosophy of science has helped us see the ways in which theorizing and analyzing theories is a much more complicated, human experience than had been thought. This is not to deny that science is a relatively more objective enterprise directed at creating theories that are tested against the data produced by scientific experimentation, but rather specifically to note that science is not the utterly objective enterprise devoid of the human influence that many wanted it to be.

If the characterization of science as thoroughly objective is incomplete, so too is the characterization of religion as only interested in subjective experience, values, the transcendent and questions of ultimate concern. Such a characterization overlooks many dimensions of the religions. One of these dimensions is the prepositional or declarative dimension of religion in that religion can make assertions or holds presuppositions about ultimate reality, anthropology, and ethics and morality. The religions generally—and Christianity as the particular religion of focus in the present study—make claims about the nature of the world and about human nature in addition to their claims about God and "ultimate reality." Further, the ethical claims of the religions about "the good" have implications for

*It would be naive of us here not to acknowledge the way that this argument will be used against our claims in this study that we are falsifying the claim that change of sexual orientation is impossible. Yes, falsification is complex, and our critics will, as we say here, claim rather loudly that our methodology was faulty or that we are dishonest. Falsification, we would reply, is complex, but not impossible, and further that we are honestly reporting our results and our methods are "good enough" for the purpose.

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the scientific study of human beings, in that claims about what is (and is not) good must be considered as making assertions about optimal human functioning, claims that overlap and intersect with social scientific studies of persons. And some aspects of some religions make factual claims about historical events, as when traditional Christians claim that Jesus lived, performed miracles, died by crucifixion and rose from the dead.

It is a distortion to treat religions as noncognitive phenomena of an exclusively intuitive or experiential nature that make no claims about reality. Christianity, in particular, makes concrete claims about reality (including personhood and human sexuality). Nevertheless, such declarative aspects of religious belief can be complex, inconsistent and vague, not unlike those of scientific (and specifically psychological) paradigms.

We believe that the distinctive identities of science and religion can be respected and not conflated; we do not seek to substitute religion for psychological science nor the reverse. At the same time, we believe that a proper and rigorous understanding of both science and religion allows for the possibility of meaningful dialogue between the two.[8] We have pointed out that science and religion are often mischaracterized and that the mischaracterizations themselves present an obstacle to meaningful dialogue. An accurate understanding of both science and religion can help us see the potential for a mutually enriching relationship.

Another key to justifying the legitimacy of a dialogue between science and religion involves the recognition that a variety of metaphysical statements or commitments shape the practice of science. Two recent articles have provided support for the claim that such metaphysical statements, including religious beliefs, often are a factor in the shaping of the conceptualizations of the subject matter on which psychological research and practice are built. Sampson focused directly on the "role of religion in setting the terms" of the entire discipline of psychology for the conceptualization of a fundamental dimension of personhood, namely whether we adopt a "collectivist or an individualistic understanding of the person-other relationship."[9] Contrary to the standard account contrasting supposed Western-Judeo-Christian individualism with Eastern-Buddhist collectivism, Sampson contrasted Protestant Christian individualism with Judaic-Rabbinic collectivism. He discussed the tendency for psychologists to un-

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derestimate the impact of religion on culture, arguing that key assumptions that shape our research programs are influenced by religious conceptions and convictions. Specifically, "the very choice of the individual as the central object of psychological study and the key to unlocking the mysteries of human nature is supported by a set of assumptions that are derived in great measure from a particular configuration of religious beliefs and values, primarily Christian."[10]

An article by Redding provides a second example.[11] Redding made the provocative suggestion that political ideology can function in much the same way as religion in shaping the ways we conceive of problems in psychology. Redding suggests that background assumptions of a political nature (and his argument works for religion as well) shape what we simply assume versus what we deem as requiring explanation, what we construe as a legitimate question and a legitimate answer to that question, and what we deem to be methodology suitable for providing a valid answer: "how one defines a problem goes a long way in determining the proposed solution. . . . [S]ociopolitical biases influence the questions asked, the research methods selected, the interpretation of research results, the peer review process, judgments about research quality, and decisions about whether to use the research in policy advocacy."[12]

With Redding, Sampson and philosopher of science Mary Midgley, we would argue that we

> have a choice of what myths, what visions we will use to help us understand the physical world [i.e., the subject matter of science]. We do not have a choice of understanding it without using any myths or visions at all. Again, we have a real choice between becoming aware of these myths and ignoring them. If we ignore them, we travel blindly inside myths and visions that are largely provided by other people. This makes it much harder to know where we are going.[13]

What this means is that science, especially social science, does not advance in the way many of us presumed in our high school science experiences, that is, simply through the accumulation of bare facts that are known for certain. Rather, science starts with *ideas*, with complicated conjectures, about the way the world (or at least that slice of the world which is our sub-

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ject matter) *is*. In the words of one author, we start the project of doing science with "metaphysical sentences," which are beliefs about our subject matter that are deeply embedded in our broader web of beliefs about the nature of reality about us and which beliefs are affected by evidence but not directly or immediately testable against experience.[14] The psychologist studying the mind-numbingly complex topic of human personality begins, before gathering any data, with a set of understandings that guides the questions one asks and indeed shapes what one regards as data and what one regards as irrelevant. Different background beliefs or metaphysical sentences will generate different questions as one approaches the complex subject of human sexuality.

Even so, *science is more than the debating of background beliefs*. As religious psychologists who are attempting to do science, we must recognize that the success of any such dialogue about the beliefs that are guiding our psychological work will be measured by the empirical fruitfulness of the dialogue, by the capacity of the dialogue to generate theoretical approaches that will in turn generate novel and significant hypotheses regarding measurable phenomena that yet in turn yield empirically powerful findings in comparison to competing explanatory systems. Paul Meehl, chafing about those he regards as "obscurantists" who minimize the importance of scientific accountability to data, said "[No] quotes from [philosopher of science Thomas] Kuhn can avoid the task of *proving* what one claims to have observed, and in a way that does not require the skeptic to accept one's theory, *that being what is in dispute*."[15] We concur with Meehl: dialogue that never results in empirically fertile inquiry and examination of data is dialogue that ultimately fails to engage the field of science. The point of the dialogue is to give religious traditions and resources the chance to explicitly shape the framework of metaphysical assumptions that in turn shape how we do our research and on what topics, and how it is interpreted and applied. The jury is yet out on whether this dialogue will indeed be recognized as productive by the field.

In deciding whether a dialogue with religion could enrich psychological theory, research and practice, we note that religious thought will rarely contribute unequivocal, immediately quantifiable, testable hypotheses. As McClay said, a "Christian perspective will not necessarily generate a spe-

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cific or uniform agenda. Christianity is not an ideology, and it almost never leads its adherents to identical positions on questions of policy or politics. But it will profoundly shape the way questions are posed."[16] In shaping how questions are posed, though, a religious vision can generate, by extrapolation, hypotheses that can inspire research programs.[17]

That is what we believe has happened here. The conservative Christian communities that ground their comprehensive vision of sexuality in the teachings of the Bible, that regard homosexual conduct to be immoral and in crucial ways "unnatural," and who also have a view of God that trusts in and expects his intervention in daily life (with all of these explored in greater depth in chap. 2), these communities claim to be producing outcomes that most of contemporary secular psychology believes to be impossible: change in sexual orientation. The empirical exploration of this phenomena gives us an opportunity to explore a phenomenon of significant scientific interest, one that also stands at the intersection of profound metaphysical disputes about the nature of sexuality and personhood.

A Constructive Relationship Between Science and Religion

Jones has argued that psychology has historically been imperialistic toward religion.[18] This can be demonstrated in the literature about homosexuality, where the presumption often is that the "facts" modern science has produced about homosexuality should displace ancient prejudice and force change in contemporary religious belief.

Jones went on to argue that some psychologists (such as Perry London)[19] have recognized a possible role for religion in that applied psychology must be seen as always having a moral horizon, a normative dimension whenever it intervenes in human life. Hence, at least some psychologists have recognized the legitimate place of religion as a (junior?) dialogue partner about the moral and ethical dimension of intervention in human life.

But Jones went further in arguing for a "constructive" relationship between psychology and religion, proposing three facets of such a relationship:

- A "critical-evaluative mode of functioning, whereby social scientific theories and paradigms are examined and evaluated by the individual scientist for their fit with his or her religious presuppositions."[20]

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- The "constructive mode of relating religious presuppositions to science should occur when religious belief contributes positively to the progress of science by suggesting new modes of thought which transform an area of study by shaping new perceptions of the data and new theories."[21]
- The "dialogical" nature of the relationship whereby "new findings in cosmology, sociobiology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and even psychology should infuse and affect the religious enterprise."[22]

We offer this study in the positive spirit of such a constructive relationship. This study will stand as a challenge of sorts to the field of psychology, but we offer this challenge in a constructive spirit of dialogue, one that presumes that the field and the public are searching for truth, including truth about our sexuality and sexual natures. We have been dubious since early in our professional lives about the rush to declare homosexual orientation (indeed all sexual orientations) unchangeable and the very attempt to change harmful; we have known people who claimed to have experienced such change. As we will document, there is room for dialogue, for agnosticism, for disagreement about this complex aspect of human functioning.

And so we begin this dialogue here with a brief overview of some of the complexities about sexual orientation, and then will return to our discussion of the intersection of religion and psychology.

Sexual Orientation

When people seek services to help them change their orientation, what exactly is it they are seeking to change?

To understand this issue we need a better understanding of what sexual orientation actually *is*. Sexual orientation typically refers to the directionality of a person's experiences of sexual attraction. Sexual orientation refers to a person's sexual predispositions, and these may come from a variety of sources: *nature* (biological antecedents) or *nurture* (environmental or psychological factors) or, most likely, some combination of both. The consensus today is that few people choose to have a homosexual orientation (or heterosexual, for that matter). Rather, they find themselves experiencing same-sex attraction, and when same-sex rather than opposite-

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sex attractions predominate, we refer to the person as having a homosexual orientation.

Several theories have emerged regarding the etiology of homosexuality.[23] Those implicating nature focus primarily on research on direct and indirect evidences of genetic influences, prenatal hormonal exposure and differences in brain structures. Research on potential genetic differences include direct evidence from gene scans (which have yet to produce replicated or significant findings) and indirect evidence from behavioral genetics studies of differences in concordance rates found in twin studies (which have produced much more equivocal results than some interpreters allege).[24] Support for the prenatal hormonal hypothesis includes studies of animal fetuses that have been injected prenatally with abnormal doses of sex hormones (which suffer from questionable relevance to natural conditions), from studies comparing anatomical brain structures among homosexual male, heterosexual male and heterosexual females (see pp. 96-97), and from research suggesting that the probabilities of homosexual orientation for males increase slightly as one has more older brothers. Studies of animal analogues to human homosexuality have produced fascinating results looking particularly at "gay fruit flies"[25] and "gay sheep,"[26] and while some researchers find such evidence suggestive, others raise concerns about the fundamental differences between animal and human sexual experience. Concerning the studies of brain structures, the studies completed to date have suffered inconsistent findings, failure to reproduce findings and poor methodology, though some consensus is emerging that one specific brain area, the interstitial nucleus of the hypothalamus, area 3 (or INAH3), may be different in homosexuals and heterosexuals, though this could be a result rather than a cause of homosexual orientation and behavior.[27]

The theories implicating nurture tend to focus on parent-child relationships, and psychodynamic theory has been the most clearly articulated theory for the etiology of homosexuality. Critics argue that there is little empirical evidence to support such theories; however, proponents point to studies implicating early childhood development, including research implicating disordered family relationships (e.g., loss of a parent through death or divorce), early homosexual behavior, and childhood sexual abuse as possible causal factors. One recent and powerful finding out of a huge national database implicates family structure as

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a possible causal factor in shaping homosexual orientation.[28]

This research is as of yet decidedly inconclusive. We do not know what causes sexual orientation. We can say definitively that it is not genes alone and that the causal process is undoubtedly multifactorial and complex, but beyond this firm conclusions are not responsibly drawn. But to understand causation, we should understand precisely what it is that we seek to explain. Do we know what sexual orientation is?

WHAT IS AN "ORIENTATION"?

We often use the terms *heterosexual*, *homosexual* and *bisexual* to communicate information about a person's sexual orientation. Interestingly, there remains much debate among human sexuality experts as to what sexual orientation actually *is*. The debate is typically characterized as being between essentialists and constructionists.[29]

Essentialists generally hold that the types of sexual orientation we have been discussing, that is, heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual, represent what Stein refers to as "natural human kinds" that can be found in other cultures and throughout history.[30] Some essentialists are also nativists insofar as they assume that sexual orientation is a real thing or essence that is produced by specific genetic or prenatal hormonal influences that lead to actual differences in orientation.

Constructionists, in contrast, hold the view that sexual orientations are "social human kinds."[31] From this perspective the distinctions we make among homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual orientations reflect linguistic constructs that capture certain culturally derived meanings about sexual behavior. To the constructionist, sexual orientations are categories, linguistic constructs, not unlike the categories we use to describe political preferences such as Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative. These categories are not universal "givens" across all cultures and time. Rather, they are constructs fashioned by and given meaning within our society.

Edward Laumann and his colleagues observe that many scientists assume that essentialism is true for the purposes of conducting research.[32] They may personally adhere to constructionism in their actual beliefs about the nature of sexual orientation, but for the purposes of conducting research they rely on essentialist categories.

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Unfortunately, the debate about the nature of sexual orientation is not merely philosophical. It can have an impact on our understanding of people who seek to change their sexual orientation. In our opinion many people who implicitly adopt an essentialist perspective often lapse into a stronger form of essentialism. A strong form of essentialism begins with the premise that sexual orientations are universal, that is, sexual orientations exist across all cultures and throughout history. The second claim is that orientation is a real thing or essence. Third, this essence is presumed to be at the core of one's very self as a human being and thus defines who they are as a person. Same-sex behavior, it follows, is morally blameless behavior that is in fact prescribed for those who experience same-sex attraction: "Even disavowing homosexuality is a response to it; and the response slowly, subtly alters who you are. . . . The abandonment of intimacy and the rejection of one's emotional core are, I have come to believe, alloyed evils."[33]

The strong form of essentialism links same-sex attraction to self-identification and claims that the expression of that identity is a moral good. Same-sex behavior then is removed from the category of behaviors that can be judged to be immoral in and of themselves and is considered alongside any other morally neutral behavior that must be judged for its consequences (or some other ethical criteria rather than something intrinsic to the act). Many critics of "reorientation" therapies assume a strong form of essentialism, and in the discussions about sexual identity and change, evidence for strong forms of essentialism can be seen in concerns about gay, lesbian and bisexual persons failing to act on the attractions that reflect their orientation. Consider Troiden's unsubstantiated claim that those who experience same-sex attraction and *dis*-identify with those attractions or pursue chastity are at-risk:

> Women and men who *capitulate* avoid homosexual activity because they have internalized a stigmatizing view of homosexuality. The persistence of homosexual feelings in the absence of homosexual activity, however, may lead them to experience self-hatred and despair.[34]

Rather than formally arguing for specific metaphysical and moral claims—or providing evidence from the behavioral sciences to support im-

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plicit metaphysical assumptions—many authors and researchers merely presume them to be true.

In addition to the empirical question of whether there is research to support specific forms of essentialism, the strong form of essentialism allows people to describe their same-sex behavior as a necessary expression of an orientation that is a *given* of existence. People are able to identify with their same-sex attractions without taking responsibility for such identification or subsequent behavior, which establishes an inroad to experiencing same-sex attractions as an identity.

What is particularly important for understanding the study we have conducted is that Christianity has historically rejected a strong form of essentialism and affirmed God's intention to commune with us and to interact with us as persons who make real choices among alternatives, called to live in a manner consistent with God's revealed will for human sexual expression. Christians do not simply follow their sexual impulses; rather, they look outside themselves to evaluate their attractions and live in way that is in keeping with God's will. We will find that the individuals in view in this study—the "clients" of Exodus—mostly reject the kind of essentialism we have just been discussing. They reject that homosexual attraction and action define the core self, reject the notion that this is a given of their existence, reject that the embrace of their essential identity as gay or lesbian is the pathway to wholeness, and reject the notion that they cannot change.

"Sexual Minorities" in Contemporary American Culture

The essentialist-constructionist debate raises several questions among conservative religious persons as to how to think about what it means to identify as "gay" in our culture. The community of persons who have a homosexual orientation is now referred to as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) community, or "gay community" for short. They are also referred to as "sexual minorities" in contemporary American culture.

It is perhaps more accurate to make a distinction between those who report a homosexual orientation and those who take on a gay identity. In fact, it may be helpful to make a three-tier distinction among those who

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experience same-sex attraction, those who have a homosexual orientation, and those who identify with their attractions and integrate them into a gay identity. The most descriptive approach is to simply refer to those persons who report experiencing same-sex attraction. For example, Laumann and his colleagues found 6.2% of males and 4.4% of females reported experiencing attraction to members of the same sex.[35] Among those who experience same-sex attraction, some experience a consistent, persistent experience that we commonly refer to as a homosexual orientation. In the Laumann study 2.0% of males and 0.9% of females reported identifying themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Among these an even smaller percentage self-identifies as gay or lesbian, that is, they take on the sociocultural identity as "gay."

The tension surrounding appropriate language can be placed in a conceptual context of what it means to have a sexual identity. Sexual identity is not the same thing as sexual orientation, though people often confuse the two terms. Sexual identity has been defined in a few different ways but with significant conceptual overlap. For example, Shively and DeCecco focused on *biological sex* (as male or female), *gender identity* (sense of being masculine or feminine), *social sex role* (adherence to social expectations for one's sex) and *sexual orientation* (direction of one's sexual attraction).[36] More recently, Althof mentioned the three key distinctions of *gender* (as one's sense of being male or female), *object choice* (those people or items to whom one is sexually attracted) and *intention* (what a person actually wants to do with their desires).[37] These accounts of sexual identity point to the complexities inherent in discussions of a shift in preferred language from *homosexual* to *gay*. To use the term *gay* is to say something about sociocultural communities that have formed among those who have a shared identity.*

One of the problems with this shift in language from *homosexual* to *gay* is that it is one more way in which we blur important, meaningful distinc-

*This is how the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* explained its decision to shift preferred language in APA style away from *homosexual* to *gay:* "*Lesbian* and *gay* refer primarily to identities and to culture and communities that have developed among people who share those identities." Further, "the terms lesbians and gay men are preferable to homosexual when referring to specific groups. . . . Homosexuality has been associated in the past with negative stereotypes." American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001), Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, p. 67.

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tions by treating certain words as synonymous. By treating *homosexual* or *homosexually oriented* as synonymous with *gay* is to actually leave out an important subpopulation of persons who experience same-sex attraction but do not identify with their experiences and do not wish to integrate them into a gay identity.*

The most descriptive way to speak of a person's experiences is to say that he or she has same-sex feelings or sexual attractions. It is the most descriptive account one can give because it simply means giving an account of the person's experience of erotic attraction. In the Laumann and colleagues study, 6.2% of men and 4.5% of women reported experiencing same-sex attraction.[39]

When we consider the relationship between same-sex attraction and a homosexual orientation, it is not always clear how much same-sex attraction translates into a person's subjective account that they have a homosexual or bisexual orientation. When people report same-sex attraction continually, or perhaps *persistently,* we often refer to that person as having a homosexual *orientation*. Homosexual orientation normally refers to the consistent directionality of one's experiences of sexual attraction, that is, the attractions are consistently same-sex in such a way that we think of the person's attractions as *oriented* to the same sex. It might also be said that those who identify as having a homosexual orientation and those who report having a bisexual orientation are a subpopulation of those who report experiencing same-sex attraction. In other words, many more people may have occasional experiences of same-sex attraction but they would not have so many or such a consistent experience of same-sex attraction that they would think of themselves as having a homosexual orientation. It may also be the case that even if a person experienced significantly intense same-sex attraction, they might refuse to describe themselves as having a homosexual orientation on metaphysical grounds, that is, they may believe that sexual orientation is something real, but that the category "heterosexual" is the only natural human sexual orientation, and that other experiences that are referred to as "homosexuality" and "bisexuality" are linguistic constructs fashioned by society to describe variations in sexual preference. Generally speaking, however, the language "homosexual orientation" is descriptive and not loaded with any implicit meaning; it does not necessarily

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communicate anything definitive about that person's sexual identity.

This is the first culture throughout history in which a substantial number of individuals have said of themselves, "I am gay."[40] A number of historical factors appear to have contributed to this point in time when the emergence of a gay community was even a possibility. In his analysis of the various forms of homosexuality, Herdt concluded that "only by disengaging sexuality from the traditions of family, reproduction, and parenthood was the evolution of the gay movement a social and historical likelihood."[41]

Although many theorists believe that the beginnings of sexual orientation are present early on in a person's life, solidification of a homosexual orientation and integration of same-sex attraction into a gay identity is something that occurs over time. In most models this occurs in later childhood through young adulthood.[42]

Also, although this subpopulation has not been studied extensively, research suggests there are a number of people who experience same-sex attraction but who dis-identify with a gay identity, that is, they choose not to integrate their experiences of same-sex attraction or a homosexual or bisexual orientation into a gay identity. For example, Yarhouse and Tan compared and contrasted the experiences of 20 individuals who identified as Christian and integrated their experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity, and 34 individuals who identified as Christian and dis-identified with a gay identity.[43] Dis-identification can also be found in studies of gay and lesbian identity development and synthesis. For example, 15% of McDonald's sample of 199 males reported not having acquired a positive gay identity but had an alternative sexual identity.[44] Also, 3 of 14 lesbians in Sophie's study reported dis-identifying with their experiences of same-sex attraction and self-identifying as heterosexual.[45]

So while we might refer to those who self-identify as "gay" as sexual minorities, there is also a group of persons who experience same-sex attraction but do not assume a gay identity. They are a minority among those who identify with the gay community, and perhaps as minorities within a sexual minority group they are particularly marginalized in society. Not all who experience same-sex attraction identify themselves as having a homosexual orientation; not all who experiences, same-sex attraction or who identify themselves as having a homosexual orientation engage in homo-

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sexual behavior; not all who experience same-sex attraction or identify themselves as having a homosexual orientation or engage in homosexual behavior in turn think of themselves as "gay."

We want to pursue one more chain of thought in this section. We would argue, on behalf of the population of individuals under study in this project, that those seeking change of sexual orientation are often the object of misunderstanding, scorn and active suppression in contemporary society. Nothing serves to demonstrate this better than the amazing and rapid transition in the relationship of sexual orientation and the diagnosis of "mental illness" in the pages of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*[46] of the American Psychiatric Association, the "diagnostic Bible" of the mental health professions, across its various editions over the last three decades.*

In the first edition of the *DSM* in 1952, the manifestation of homosexual orientation was a disorder by its very nature; in this edition, homosexuality was prima facie evidence of a "personality disorder." To be homosexual, in other words, was to be disordered.

Even in the 1960s the homosexual condition began to move away from being considered a "mental illness" in and of itself. In the second edition of the *DSM*, published in 1968, homosexuality appeared as a separate disorder under the categorization of the "neuroses," a diagnostic category whose prominent feature was anxiety, but was kept separate from the sexual deviancy classification. Specifically, the *DSM-II* added a new classification called "sexual orientation disturbance [homosexuality]," but homosexual orientation per se was no longer a disorder. Rather, this classification was for

> individuals whose sexual interests are directed primarily toward people of the same sex and who are either disturbed by, in conflict with, or wish to change their sexual orientation. This diagnostic category is distinguished from homosexuality, which by itself does not constitute a psychiatric disorder. Homosexuality per se is one form of sexual behavior, and with other forms of sexual behavior which are not by themselves psychiatric disorders, are not listed in this nomenclature.[47]

*Parts of the following discussion of the evolution of DSM terminology are adapted from the doctoral dissertation of Jon S. Ebert, "Toward Crisis or Communion: Questioning Psychological Distress in Religiously Mediated Change," Wheaton College, supervised by Stanton L. Jones and completed 2003.

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It was no longer the case that to be homosexual was to be disordered, but rather a diagnostic category was set up for those distressed about their orientation. This foreshadows the question we sought to study here, in that the insipient implication of this conceptualization was that if there is a "disorder" present with homosexual orientation, it is tied to being distressed about the orientation.

In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality per se from the *DSM* as a disorder, though when one understands clearly exactly what the *DSM-II* said, this was less of the radical move than it is often represented to be. This became codified in the *DSM-III* (1980): sexual orientation disturbance [homosexuality] was removed and a new classification called "Ego-dystonic homosexuality" was added. This classification was reserved for "homosexuals for whom changing sexual orientations is a persistent concern, and should be avoided in cases where the desire to change sexual orientations may be brief, temporary manifestation of an individual's difficulty in adjusting to a new awareness of his or her homosexual impulses."[48]

This change was short lived; the *DSM-III-R* (1987) removed ego-dystonic homosexuality and any mention of homosexuality all together. The *DSM-IV* (1994) made only minor changes in the treatment of sexual orientation. The most recent edition, *DSM-IV-TR* (2000), is more explicit about the types of deviation clinicians should not pathologize, stating, "Neither deviant behavior (e.g. political, religious, or sexual) nor conflicts that are primarily between the individual and society are mental disorders unless the deviance or conflict is a symptom of a dysfunction in the individual."[49] It later mentions sexual orientation generally in a diagnosis called "sexual disorder not otherwise specified (NOS)." Within the sexual disorder NOS, one of the criteria is "persistent and marked distress about sexual orientation."[50]

With this final change the transformation in views is clear. Just over three decades before, to be homosexual was to be disordered. Now, *to be distressed about one's sexual orientation* is to be disordered. Put another way, disorder was once considered endemic to homosexual orientation, but now it is a disorder not to be fully accepting of one's "given" sexual orientation. Now, individuals who seek change to their sexual orientations are pathol-

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ogized. Who is the sexual minority now in the eye of the mental health establishment?

A Case Study in Dialogue

The present study is, we hope and intend, an example of a constructive exchange between psychology and religion, one with the potential to manifest all three of these positive characteristics as articulated previously. Already we failed to resist to the temptation to leap into this dialogue, saying "some psychologists say this, but Christians have believed . . ." It is this sort of dialogue that characterizes the present study.

The hypotheses for the study came out of a fruitful interchange between the type of psychological essentialist view previously discussed and a Christian theology and ethic that regards homosexual practice as a moral violation of God's intent for human life and the "homosexual condition" as one that must be seen as disordered in comparison to God's creational intent. This religious orientation led us to question whether secular conceptualizations of sexual orientation were (1) intellectually compelling and (2) empirically sound or well established; this is "the critical-evaluative mode of functioning."

In the light of these questions, we proposed empirical research hypotheses in order to seek to advance the science of psychology. If there are trustworthy verities in modern psychology, the immutability of sexual orientation would seem to be among them. To quote Jones's 1994 study:

> Koch (1981) said "We cannot discriminate a so-called variable . . . without making strong presumptions of philosophical cast about the nature of our human subject matter" (p. 267; see also Tjeltveit, 1989). The nature of psychology, given the complexity, irreducibility and obscurity of its subject matter, is profoundly shaped by conceptual presuppositions we bring to our areas of study. This "theory-ladenness" (a term attributed to philosopher of science N. R. Hanson) of the data may be accentuated in the human or behavioral sciences.[51]

Our presumptions of a "philosophical/theological" nature led us to explore what most psychologists today would believe to be impossible: change in sexual orientation. Whereas it would seem that nonreligious psychologists have tended to look at the claims of sexual-orientation

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change as necessarily a false artifact of extremist religious belief, we were more open to examination of this claim. Perhaps, we pondered, contemporary science has it wrong about the immutability of sexual orientation, and perhaps even about the nature of sexual orientation itself and about the fundamental role of sexuality in human personality. Indeed, our results stand as an anomaly to the reigning paradigms.

Other anomalies have been documented, but without fundamentally challenging the reigning paradigm. Surely the most bizarre would be the study published by three respected behavioral scientists in the late 1970s of the "healing" of a transsexual through exorcism. Abel, Barlow and Blanchard were running a fairly standard evaluation protocol on transsexuals going through the (then avant-garde) surgical sex-reassignment treatment process.[52] "John," a biological male who wanted to become a female, had already been undergoing psychotherapy directed at gender-reassignment as well as hormone therapy to enlarge his breasts and to develop other secondary sex characteristics of females; he was already living as a female, and was on the verge of the final and irreversible surgical procedure to remove his male genitals and replace them with constructed female genitals. The subject, however, disappeared from the study before surgery, and only came in contact accidentally with the researchers some time later, at which time the following story emerged: Family members and friends had pleaded with John to see a faith-healer/exorcist, who had indeed "cast out" many evil spirits, leaving John feeling completely cured of his transsexualism. Abel, Barlow and Blanchard put John through the standard battery used with the rest of their patients and found to their amazement that by all scientific standards John was no longer a transsexual, but in every discernible way a healthy, functional male whose biological and psychological gender were in perfect synchrony. The authors commented, "What cannot be denied, however, is that a patient who was very clearly a transsexual by the most conservative criteria assumed a long-lasting masculine gender identity in a remarkably short period of time following an apparent exorcism."[53]

Similarly, other studies have been published claiming that homosexual orientation can be changed, some claiming the possibility of change by religious means. Perhaps the first was by respected psychiatrist E. Mansell Pattison, whose report in a premier journal of psychiatry of documented

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change in homosexual orientation as a result of involvement in a religious healing ministry of a Pentecostal church was discussed and generally dismissed.[54] Much more recently, respected research psychiatrist Robert Spitzer reported his study of a large number of "success cases" of religiously mediated change, but was subjected to unprecedented negative critique and his findings dismissed as post hoc.[55]

The present study of the experiences of men and women who enter a religiously affiliated ministry to help them change their sexual orientation can be treated as a case study of science examining what is purported to be a religiously grounded phenomenon and of scientific study inspired by a set of religious presuppositions alien to a good many members of the scientific community. And we would add as well that our study, though decidedly imperfect, corrects for the most glaring limitations of prior studies because it is prospective (attempts to start assessing the participants at the beginning of the change process rather than dealing with "after the fact" successes) and longitudinal (following participants over time rather than serving as a "one time snapshot" of their status). The American Psychological Association has set these standards as the necessary basis for a serious claim that change is possible; it says that the problem with research claiming to show sexual orientation change is that "treatment outcome is not followed and reported over time as would be the standard to test the validity of any mental health intervention."[56] This study meets these standards.

In other words, the often very separate worlds of behavioral sciences and religion intersect in meaningful ways in the lives of these who turn to religious resources to change their sexual orientation because of reasons grounded in their religious worldviews.

Unfortunately, the scientific worldview we have been discussing may make it difficult for some within scientific circles to understand the motivations of those who have chosen to pursue these services. Post believes that a "strong scientific ideology and world view" may contribute to the failure among some clinicians to assess religious functioning or to "consider religion or other cultural aspects of patient experience with seriousness."[57] A historical analysis also suggests that as the scientific framework emerged it challenged existing "theologies,"[58] thereby planting a seed of suspicion toward religious persons within those trained as scientists.

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Bluntly, many scientists are deeply distrustful of and suspicious toward religious belief and experience.

Interestingly, the United States, though it has seen an increase in religious diversity in the past two hundred years, has remained remarkably religious in its overall composition. The U.S. population today is predominantly Judeo-Christian, with Protestants making up over 50% of the population, Catholics representing about 25% of the population, and Jews making up about 2% of the population.[59] Other religions, for example, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist, account for less than 10% of the population; about the same percentage reports no religious preference.

But does religious affiliation translate into anything of any greater significance? Recent polls reflect that over 90% of people surveyed believe in "God or a universal spirit."[60] Nearly 90% of people identified religion as either "very important" (58%) or "fairly important" (29%), and nearly 90% pray to God at least occasionally to thank God for blessings or to talk to God, to ask for their sins to be forgiven or to ask for guidance.

Religiously Grounded Presuppositions Alien to the Scientific Community

If we are a society that is relatively religious in terms of the general population, and if there are among those who are religious a group of people who actually try to follow the prescriptive claims of their faith community, it would come as no surprise to find a subpopulation of persons who do not wish to act on their experiences of same-sex attraction in light of their religious beliefs and values.

But the risk is that some religiously grounded presuppositions are alien to the scientific community, such as the presupposition that God has preexisting claims on one's sexuality and sexual behavior. When these presuppositions are alien to those behavioral scientists providing services through the mental health professions, there is a danger of a fundamental failure on the part of the clinician to understand and enter the phenomenological world of the client. Post recognized the risk when he stated:

> No one could deny that an incorrect clinical interpretation of a religious patient would be harmful if it leads to an incorrect or distorted picture of a person's mental health. Certainly, a bias against religion would contribute to

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> failing to recognize the religious patient in her or his fullest human dimension—a failure that can only compromise the therapeutic enterprise. It is difficult to estimate the extent of this bias in clinical practice, but to the extent that it may occur, it is cause for concern.[61]

One of the most relevant religiously grounded presuppositions that is alien to some within the scientific community is the moral valuation of homosexual conduct that fuels motivation to pursue change of orientation treatment.

In chapter two we will look specifically at the population we are studying and how religion plays a role in their lives, as well as ways in which religiously grounded presuppositions motivate their pursuit of treatment. As we turn our attention to the population in question, we would note that there has been considerable and intense debate in professional circles about whether people have the right to choose to seek to change their sexual reorientation. What if that decision is based on religiously grounded presuppositions?

Many within professional mental health circles recognize that we have moved from implied consent (prior to the twentieth century) to informed consent, which was established by case law and reflects a growing respect for personal autonomy in making decisions about medical procedures. Not long ago people were not given the opportunity to consent to medical procedures. Their consent was implied as patients deferred to the expertise of their physician. That was the standard in health care. But we have witnessed a shift from implied consent to informed consent. Today people have the right to choose among treatment options, as well as the right to decline treatment against the judgment of their medical provider. Informed consent is the standard today. However, we are beginning to see a movement toward what might be referred to as "ignored consent." There are those who who would keep patients from access to reorientation therapies even if they give consent; we will look more closely at such arguments in chapter ten.

Conclusion

This study is an exercise of conversation between religion and psychological science. The prevailing psychological wisdom is that sexual orientation cannot be changed and that the attempt to change is harmful. The reli-

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gious perspective of traditional Christian belief offers a contrasting perspective from which to see the homosexual condition. Psychological science must finally put its emphasis on empirical data. Out of conversation with religious belief, that of the authors and of an understudied minority of those experiencing same-sex attraction, comes the empirical hypothesis that sexual orientation may not be immutable. The present study produces significant scientific evidence that sexual orientation is in fact changeable for some, and this should trigger a considerable reexamination of many of the presuppositions about sexual orientation and sexual identity that hold sway in contemporary Western culture.