

Round Peg, Square Hole: Being an Evangelical Christian in GLB Studies

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In this article, the author discusses his experiences as an evangelical Christian in gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) studies. The article opens with a discussion of modes of relating religion and science: critical-evaluative, constructive, and dialogical. Applications are then made to discussions of Christianity and GLB studies in psychology. Following examples of scholarship and experiences in each of these modes of relating, the author discusses several challenges faced by evangelical Christian working in GLB studies, as well as lessons learned.

When I was asked to reflect on what it is like to work as an evangelical Christian in gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) studies, I was reminded of the idiom, “It’s like placing a round peg in a square hole.”¹ This phrase brings to mind images of something that just does not fit, does not belong. Readers may be aware that the phrase “fitting a round peg into a square hole” dates to 1800 and the use of trunnels or “tree nails” which were used to build bridges and frame houses and were widely used in shipbuilding (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/trunnels>). A trunnel is a wooden peg which was cut square and pounded into a round hole. Today the phrase refers to being a *fish out of water* – being in a situation in which one feels *out of place*.

So is an evangelical Christian in GLB studies a *fish out of water*, which is the current association, or does the arrangement in some way reflect the original meaning of the word? Perhaps the fit is difficult at times, but the difficult fit is a genuine reflection of the nature of the materials that suits a specific purpose that would not be gained through other means.

In any case, I do believe that conservative or evangelical Christians ought to be involved in GLB studies. My rationale takes me back to what it means to be a Christian in the field of psychology. The approach to integration that initially started me on this path was one of the first and most influential articles on integration I read in graduate school. It was Alvin Plantinga’s inaugural address in 1983 as the John A. O’Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame titled “Advice to Christian Philosophers.” In that address, Plantinga (1984) shared that Christian philosophers have an obligation to the Christian community to be the philosophers of the Christian community. In our minds as young graduate students we were substituting the field of *philosophy* with that of *psychology*:

Christian [psychologists] ... are the [psychologists] of the Christian community; and it is part of their task as Christian [psychologists] to serve the Christian community. But the Christian community has its own questions, its own concerns, its own topics for investigation, its own agenda and its own research programs. (Plantinga, p. 6)

What struck me most about Plantinga’s call was the idea that Christians in the field of psychology have their own questions to ask, their own topics to address. We cannot expect non-Christian psychologists² to ask about or care about the questions, topics, and research agendas that Christians care about. So we have to be in the field doing the work. In my view, Christians may not be focusing on GLB issues, but there will certainly be benefits to focusing on the issues that face Christians who are sorting out questions pertaining to their sexual identity.

This raises the question of how Christians ought to be relating their faith to the field of psychology. If there are questions that are important to address for the Christian in GLB studies, how ought the Christian approach the field to address those questions?

Modes of Relating Religion and Science

In his analysis of the relationship between religion and science, Jones (1994) gave examples of three constructive modes of relating religion and psychology: the *critical-evaluative*, *constructive*, and *dialogical modes*.³ The critical-evaluative mode of functioning exists when “social scientific theories and paradigms are examined and evaluated by the individual scientist for their fit with his or her religious presuppositions” (p. 194). For example, Van Leeuwen (2002) critiqued some aspects of evolutionary psychology and its claims regarding human sexuality and sexual behavior. She

recognized the potential value in the paradigm, but raised concerns about the absolute reductionism found in evolutionary psychology.

The *constructive* mode of relating science and religion occurs when religious presuppositions are brought to science in ways that influence or even transform a field because of new ideas and interpretations of data (Jones, 1994). Jones notes that traditional religious systems have yet to offer any “major productive scientific paradigms” (p. 194) within psychology; however, a number of less ambitious yet certainly constructive advances have been made in conceptual and empirical studies of human sexuality. Examples of a constructive mode are premised upon different assumptions about the nature of reality. It is possible that religiously-informed scientific scholarship may lead to empirically fruitful approaches to nagging problems in the field.

The third form of interaction between science and religion is what Jones (1994) refers to as the *dialogical* mode, which is essentially religion and science in dialogue with one another. Neither religion nor science should simply dictate terms to the other. Jones reminds us that it is not his intention to simply privilege religion over science; rather, his concern is to see both religion and science as different yet complementary approaches to human experience. From this perspective, while religion may influence the scientific enterprise, so too advances in science influence religion. In the study of human sexuality a dialogical approach to religion and science involves recognizing an ongoing dialogue between these two different but complementary and overlapping approaches to understanding human experience. The dialogue also leads to empirically-verifiable hypotheses, so that findings from science inform religious thought (and vice versa) on a variety of topics in human sexuality.

My focus in the early stages of my career was the critical-evaluative mode of relating. The book I co-authored with Stanton, Jones entitled *Homosexuality: The use of scientific research in the church's moral debate*, is an example of this (Jones & Yarhouse, 2000). We examined the nature of the argument that was advanced in many mainline Christian denominational sexuality study groups. Specifically, we looked at the misuse of science in the four areas of (a) prevalence estimates, (b) etiology of homosexuality, (c) status as a psychopathology (including mental health correlates), and (d) change of sexual orientation. The arguments cited in these four areas were intended to move Christians in mainline denominations away from their historical teaching on human sexuality generally and homosexuality specifically. What we found as we examined first the documents and then the science was that the argument was based upon a misuse of science. We also closed this book with a broad framework for a Chris-

tian theology of human sexuality.

Much of this critique was really an outworking of my earlier relationship with Stan and the work we had begun when I was a student and research assistant for him at Wheaton College. The first significant, independent professional step I took actually brought me into the *dialogical* mode with some members of the GLB community in psychology. It goes back a few years to when I was attending the American Psychological Association's (APA) annual meeting in Boston. I had the opportunity to sit in on a session by Ariel Shidlo and Michael Schroeder, two gay researchers who had recently completed a study of “consumers” of sexual reorientation therapy. Shidlo and Schroeder were suggesting that such therapy is harmful to unsuspecting and vulnerable clients. That session was moderated by Douglas Haldeman, a past president of the APA division interested in GLB issues in psychology. Later that day, I ran into Doug Haldeman and felt a strong sense that I should approach him about a dialogue on clinical services for people who are sorting out sexual identity issues in light of their religious beliefs and values. Although he seemed skeptical at first, he indicated he was open to exploring the possibility of dialogue.

It took a full year to not only propose a balanced symposium with two GLB psychologists and two conservative Christian mental health professionals, but also to set the stage for a respectful dialogue. We agreed to several principles that would allow us to model mutual respect to an audience that might be anticipating a fight reminiscent of an episode of *Jerry Springer*. In any case, we were able to successfully hold the symposium (Yarhouse, 2000) and model the very respect we all committed ourselves to in advance. Details of the symposium were actually covered in a news article in which this desire for respect and professionalism was noted (<http://www.narth.com/docs/commonground.html>; for the interested reader, an update on the dialogue was published approximately five years after the initial symposium; see Brooke, 2005).

The success of that exchange led to several other similar symposia at APA. For example, a couple of years later I chaired a symposium on clinical services for adolescents sorting out sexual identity questions (Yarhouse, 2004), as well as a symposium on the meaning of marriage to various religions around the world and to various groups within the GLB community (Yarhouse, 2005). This came from an understanding that there was much more diversity within the GLB community on the subject of same-sex marriage that is commonly believed. The most recent dialogue (Yarhouse & Beckstead, 2007) was over a newly-proposed Sexual Identity Therapy Framework (<http://sit-framework.com/>) as a middle ground therapy option

between the two often-polarized positions of sexual reorientation therapy and gay affirmative (or gay integrative) therapy.

Each of these symposia took the same form with representative voices on both “sides” looking for areas of common ground and doing so in the spirit of mutuality and respect. Many of these exchanges were later published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Haldeman, 2002; Shidlo & Shroeder, 2002; Throckmorton, 2002; Yarhouse & Burkett, 2002; Yarhouse & Nowacki-Butzen, 2007; Yarhouse & Tan, 2006). The work on Sexual Identity Therapy (e.g., Throckmorton & Yarhouse, 2006; Yarhouse, 2008) was cited favorably in the recent Report of the APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009) as one of several models (see also, Beckstead & Israel, 2007; Glassgold, 2008; Haldeman, 2004) for working with sexual minorities who are distressed due to the conflict they experience between their religious identity and sexual identity.

Although I continue to participate in these dialogues, I have also begun to shift into a *constructive* mode of relating Christianity and GLB studies. This was an intentional step beyond the change of sexual orientation debate. Based upon my clinical experience in this area, I began to examine the construct of sexual identity or the act of labeling oneself as gay (as well as other identity labels including straight, bi, bi-curious, lesbian, queer, questioning, curious, other, and so on). My work in this area began with a critique (Yarhouse, 2001) of the existing theories and models of sexual identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Troiden, 1979), as well as how they were being presented in the literature (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). This led to the question: *What about those who experience same-sex attraction but do not identify themselves as “gay”?*

It became clear to me that the act of labeling involves attributions about what sexual attractions *mean* to people. On the one hand, sexual identity is merely the act of labeling oneself. This act of labeling is both public (how others view the person) and private (how the person views him or herself). But the decision to form one’s identity with reference to attractions and to experience these as central to who one is *as a person* may be influenced by several factors, including one’s *biological sex* (whether a person was born male or female), *gender identity* (how masculine or feminine a person feels), *attractions* (the amount and intensity of same- and/or opposite-sex attractions), *intentions* (what a person intends to do with the attractions he or she has), *behaviors* (what a person actually does with the attractions he or she has), and *valuative frameworks* (personal and/or religious beliefs and values and

formed judgments about sexuality and sexual expression) (Yarhouse, 2001). There may be many factors that contribute to the act of labeling, and people can reflect on what is “trump” for them with respect to their decision to label themselves one way or another.

If attractions do not necessarily signal an identity, it became clear that there was an important distinction to be made between sexual attractions, a homosexual orientation, and a gay identity (Yarhouse, 2005). This “three-tier distinction” moves from descriptive to prescriptive, by which I mean that talking about same-sex attractions is a descriptive account of a person’s experiences: “I experience sexual attraction to the same sex.” Personal identity is still subject to further reflection. Similarly, a homosexual orientation reflects a person’s account of the degree and persistence of same-sex attractions. If a person has a sufficient amount of attraction toward the same sex, and if that attraction is experienced as enduring, a person might say: “I have a homosexual orientation.” Of course, a person could describe him or herself as homosexual: “I am a homosexual,” which suggests more qualities we associate with identity rather than mere description. In any case, the final tier in the three-tier distinction is a gay identity. A gay identity reflects a modern sociocultural movement that has formed an identity around experiences of same-sex attraction. It is not merely a synonym for attractions to the same sex, although some people might talk about it that way. Rather, “I am gay” is a self-defining attribution that reflects this sociocultural movement.

The focus of my research, then, has been sexual identity rather than orientation as such. From my perspective, a focus on orientation can mistakenly assume that the traditional Christian sexual ethic in some way hinges on the causes of homosexuality and whether a homosexual orientation can change. Sexual identity, in contrast, focuses the discussion on an endpoint by bringing to the foreground patterns of behavior and an identity that reflects that over time. Many of the people I work with are conservative Christians, and from that perspective, some might argue that identity speaks to what we treasure, and of whose kingdom we are a part. Dallas Willard (1998) is relevant here as he makes a distinction between what it is people have a say over: “We were made to ‘have dominion’ within appropriate domains of reality... Our ‘kingdom’ is simply the range of our effective will. Whatever we genuinely have say over is in our kingdom” (p. 21).

It may be helpful, then, to distinguish between what is in a person’s effective will. The experience of same-sex attraction is not in a person’s effective will, at least not in the same way as behavior and identity is. Most people I have met who are sorting out sexual identity questions *find themselves* attracted to the same

sex; they did not choose to experience same-sex attractions. What they are choosing is whether or not to integrate their experiences of attractions into a gay identity.

This led to an initial theoretical contribution (Yarhouse, 2001) in which I suggested a five-stage model of sexual identity development that considered the role of personal and religious moral evaluative frameworks on sexual identity development: *identity confusion*, *identity attribution*, *identity foreclosure versus expanded identity*, *identity reappraisal*, and *identity synthesis*. This was followed by a series of empirical studies (Yarhouse, Tan & Pawlowski, 2005; Yarhouse & Tan, 2004) comparing Christian sexual minorities in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) with Christian sexual minorities in Exodus International. The former identified as gay and Christian, while the later did not identify (or *dis-identified*) with a gay identity, often precisely because of a central religious identity. Several additional studies (e.g., Yarhouse, Brooke, Pisano & Tan, 2005; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean & Brooke, 2009) have expanded my own thoughts on sexual identity development and the role of attributions in making meaning out of experiences of same-sex attraction.

Throughout this time, Regent University supported the establishment of the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity (ISSI; www.sexualidentityinstitute.org) with a focus on conducting research, providing clinical services/consultations, and training students in the area of sexual identity theory and practice. Our most recent contributions include the proposal (with co-author Warren Throckmorton) of the Sexual Identity Therapy Framework (<http://sitframework.com/>) to assist clinicians in providing ethical practice in this area and to organize that work into the four main areas of assessment, advanced informed consent, psychotherapy, and synthesis. The purpose of therapy provided under this framework is to achieve congruence, so that person is able to live in a way that is consistent with their beliefs and values. This is not specifically a model for Christian counseling; rather, it is intended as a model that the mainstream mental health community could recognize as a viable alternative to the two current and more polarized approaches (gay affirmative and reorientation approaches) (see APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009).

In addition to the Sexual Identity Therapy Framework, we have also been conducting research on sexual minorities in heterosexual marriages (Yarhouse, Pawlowski & Tan, 2004; Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006; Yarhouse, Gow & Davis, 2009), efforts to change sexual orientation through involvement in religious ministries (Jones & Yarhouse, 2007), and clarifying what makes church-based ministries exemplary in their ministry to

sexual minorities (Yarhouse & Carr, 2007). Some of the most current work is in collaboration with more moderate voices within the GLB community to identify areas of agreement in providing services within a diverse cultural context (e.g., Yarhouse & Beckstead, 2007).

There have been a number of projects, then, that reflect an attempt to contribute constructively to the professional discussions centering on sexual identity. Throughout these efforts to engage the material in GLB studies as a conservative Christian, there have been several challenges faced and lessons learned. We turn now to these challenges, and I will discuss them in the form of certainties.⁴

Challenges That Take the Form of Certainties

First Certainty: I know what you believe because I know others who claim to be Christians

This is a certainty that has come from colleagues in GLB studies. Some I have interacted with have either met other conservative Christians or have in their minds images of conservative Christians that make dialogue especially difficult. (The reverse is also true: that Christians often have in their minds what it means to be gay and subsequently the associations they have also make dialogue difficult.) This often pressures Christians to move away from their own convictions to demonstrate that they are different from others who their GLB colleagues have come across, but I see this as a failure of nerve and intellectually dishonest if one is actually hoping to be in any kind of *meaningful* dialogue. After all, the very nature of diversity is to have differences of convictions.⁵

What would be helpful to cultivate is what Richard Mouw (1992) describes as *convicted civility*. This is the idea that Christians hold and express their convictions, but do so in the spirit of respect and humility. This does not resolve substantive differences, but it does go a long way in facilitating reasoned analysis, identifying areas of common concern (e.g., safety, bullying, HIV/AIDS), and so on, and modeling for others how to be in real and meaningful relationship with those with whom we disagree.

Second Certainty: I know what you believe because I know your institutional affiliation

This certainty is related to the first, because when you conduct research out of the context of a private religious institution, many people make assumptions about what they think you believe. They do this prior to reading your research, and this leads to avoidable conflict if people on both sides would take time to engage the literature first.

This certainty also comes from the Christian community because conservative Christians often assume

that they know what someone working at a private Christian institution believes by virtue of their institutional affiliation. This can come up, for example, in requests to serve as expert witness on cases of same-sex parenting, adoption, and so on, when one side requests strong pronouncements that may or may not be found in the existing data. The assumption of institutional affiliation can sometimes take the form, “We all know what the data says about ____; would you please state that for the record.” The difficulty lies, however, in the complexity of the data and how it is interpreted.

Third Certainty: I know who a person “really is” because I know that the person experiences same-sex attraction

The third certainty can come from both the GLB community and from the conservative Christian community. The form it takes in the GLB community is the assumption that same-sex attraction necessarily signals a gay identity. This assumption comes from collapsing the three constructs of attraction, orientation, and identity and treating them as synonymous. This is perhaps why the very existence of those who are no longer identifying as gay is subject to so much scrutiny and intolerance – any same-sex attraction signals an invariant orientation that is the defining and central aspect of who someone is *as a person*. They *are* gay.

I do not experience this certainty as much among conservative Christians, although a variation on this is that Christians often suggest easy answers to people for whom this is their struggle. In some ways this is a struggle for a Christian “just like any other struggle,” but in many ways it is quite unique, and to suggest otherwise reflects a deep misunderstanding and unwillingness to sit with another person’s experience.

Fourth Certainty: I know you can be healed because with God “all things are possible.”

This final certainty comes from the Christian community. Christians ought to affirm God’s sovereignty and omnipotence and God’s desire to bring about healing for people who are suffering. At the same time, Christians would do well to be consistent in how they talk about healing and apply these Scriptural references consistently to a range of real-life experiences. For example, Christians also affirm that God can bring about healing from cancer, diabetes, depression, and other enduring or chronic health concerns. But when direct healing does not appear to occur, the Christian community does what it can to be a supportive presence in the life of the person they prayed for.

Some Christians seem to hold to a different standard or expectation when it comes to same-sex attractions. They seem unwilling to come alongside a person who may have prayed for healing, but for whom healing has been marginal at best. Their emphasis on

healing as a quick and decisive outcome can reflect an unwillingness to affirm realistic, biblical hope grounded in a vision for God’s purposes that may be beyond these particular circumstances. This certainty carries with it assumption about a theodicy of sexual identity or how a person experiences pain and suffering in the context of our shared fallenness and with respect to sexual identity questions and concerns.

We have been discussing several challenges that have come up and take the form of certainties. These certainties can come from the GLB community, the Christian community, or both. We now turn to a discussion of what has been learned in having participated in GLB studies.

Lessons Learned in GLB Studies

Be cautious about ringing endorsements

One of the things I tell my students is that if you are studying or making presentations on sexual identity issues for any amount of time and you receive too many pats on the back, you are probably not accurately conveying what we know (and do not know) about the topic. The research in this area is complicated, and it is a (tempting) mistake to “preach to the choir” about what we all agree on. This is a complex and growing area of research, and those who offer strong proclamations are often the least informed or are only conveying a truncated view of the research.

Demonstrate “convicted civility”

As I suggested above, the many professional meetings over the years have given me opportunities to demonstrate *convicted civility*. Christians ought to have convictions, but too often we lead with our convictions, and we “shout down” others and become the caricature that others have of conservative Christians. On the other extreme are those who lead with civility so much so that it is difficult to know what their convictions are, unless we count as a conviction the act of civility itself. We need both today – convictions *and* civility.

Take a broader view of the GLB community

As I mentioned earlier, not everyone in the GLB community is an activist, and there are a range of voices within the GLB community. There may be value in interacting and collaborating with moderate voices. In psychology, the best way I have seen to do this is around the data. Research is the common language of psychologists in our day, and it can be helpful to use this as a basis for dialogue. Remember that many people in mainstream GLB circles have had poor or negative experiences with conservative Christians, and they often themselves talk about “us/them” which is a natural outgrowth of identifying as a sexual minority

and finding a sense of safety within one's "in group" (for a discussion of how some within the GLB community perceive conservative Christians, see Marin, 2009). Christians often do the same thing. The language of "culture wars"⁶ has not helped. It has pitted Christians against members of the GLB community and has sometimes kept both conservative Christians and members of the mainstream GLB community from thinking creatively about areas of mutual agreement and the potential for collaboration.

Recognize the people represented in the debate

This was a lesson learned early on, but one that is repeated time and time again at conferences, workshops, churches, and on my research team. It is tempting to keep a personal distance from any topic of research. Some of that may be necessary to conduct research dispassionately, so as not to operate with larger than normal blind spots and biases that are inherent to any worldview assumptions. However, the work that we do affects the lives of real people who are struggling to make sense of how to live faithfully before God as followers of Christ. It is important to keep in mind the very people whose lives are touched by the debates and discussions that center on sexual identity.

Learn from fellow believers

Throughout this entire time of conducting research and providing clinical services, I have been deeply moved by the challenges facing fellow believers who are sorting out sexual identity conflicts. They are often doubly isolated. They are isolated within the GLB community by virtue of the conservative Christian convictions, and they are isolated within the Christian community by virtue of their same-sex attractions. The struggles most of us face today are really not addressed by the local church. Pride, greed, envy, sloth – these are not the focal point of many messages today. When the local church focuses narrowly or exclusively on homosexuality, it erodes the credibility of the church to speak to a range of issues inside the church and outside the church. The people I know who feel they contend with same-sex attractions are acutely sensitive to what can become hypocrisy from the local church on matters of sin. Although some of these brothers and sisters who struggle with sexual identity and live faithfully before God do give up on the church, many stay and will in time offer the church in the West a real vision for what it means to "count the cost" of discipleship if we would be open to what they have to say.

Conclusion

In this article I discussed some of my experiences as an evangelical Christian in GLB studies. After a

discussion of various modes of relating religion and science – critical-evaluative, constructive, and dialogical – several examples of scholarship were shared as examples of each mode of relating, followed by a discussion of certainties, challenges, and lessons learned. Perhaps others will feel called to this area of research and scholarship, or feel called to other work in areas that are often not associated with evangelical Christianity. Can a round peg fit into a square hole? Not only is it possible, but sometimes it is useful, as with the original meaning of the phrase. Perhaps there is some value in feeling out of place – in reflecting upon how it can enhance various areas of scholarship. Maybe there is something to be gained when we look at our subject matter from a Christian perspective and attempt to make contributions that reflect a Christian worldview.

Notes

¹The question has also been asked whether, mathematically, a square peg fits better into a round hole or a round peg into a square hole. As it turns out you can calculate the ratio of the area of the square and of a circle and the area of a circle and area of a square and convert that into a percentage: there is a better fit (meaning less wasted space) when a round peg is fitted into a square hole (using about 78.54% of the space compared to 63.66% of the space when a square peg is fitted into a round hole). See <http://www.nzmaths.co.nz/PS/L6/Measurement/SquarePegs.aspx> for a full explanation and computation.

²By saying "non-Christian psychologists," I do not mean to suggest that there are no Christians within the GLB community, but I have come across few self-identifying conservative or evangelical Christians in GLB studies in the major mental health organizations.

³This section is adapted from Mark A. Yarhouse, "Constructive relationships between religion and the scientific study of sexuality," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 24 (1), 29-35.

⁴The language of "certainties" is from Melissa Elliot Griffith, "Opening therapy to conversations with a personal God" in F. Walsh (Ed.), *Spiritual resources in family therapy* (pp. 209-222), New York: The Guilford Press.

⁵I am often struck by the attempts in our field to have what are called "difficult dialogues." What I find is that these are almost always dialogues made "difficult" by the subject matter (e.g., a discussion of clinical services for sexual minorities) but not by the discussants (e.g., having people who have different views talk about their differences as well as areas of common ground).

⁶Ironically, at the time I original wrote these words, I had just completed a chapter I was asked to write for a book that reflects these themes of "battle" and "war." I took issue with the way the discussion was framed, but

for my part wrote about how someone might feel embattled in discussions centering on sexuality in mental health organizations.

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