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To cite this article: Clara L. Wilkins & Lerone A. Martin (2022): Harnessing religious teachings to reduce sexual prejudice, Journal of Moral Education, DOI: [10.1080/03057240.2022.2110047](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2110047)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2110047>



Published online: 27 Sep 2022.



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Harnessing religious teachings to reduce sexual prejudice

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ABSTRACT

Religion dictates the groups against whom it is seen as justifiable (even righteous) to express prejudice: often groups perceived of as violating core religious values. We review research demonstrating that for Christians, particularly conservative ones, religion seems to sanction prejudice against LGBT individuals. We describe the causes and the consequences of Christian/LGBT zero-sum beliefs (ZSBs): the extent to which gains for LGBT groups are seen as coming at a cost for Christians. We highlight how religious values can both exacerbate and mitigate ZSBs and sexual prejudice. When a Christian denomination decided to exclude gender and sexual minorities from full church participation, the Christians we interviewed disidentified with their denomination and strengthened commitment to their LGBTQ-friendly local congregations. Thus, we review how religious teachings can shape both group-based rejection and acceptance. We end with a discussion of educational programs for congregations, pastors, and methods to combat anti-LGBT bias.

KEYWORDS

Anti-LGBT bias; Christian values; zero-sum beliefs; religious education

Bias against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals is pervasive and remains relatively socially acceptable among some groups in the U.S. Despite social advancements like the legalization of same sex marriage in 2015, sexual and gender minorities remain marginalized. While they account for a relatively small proportion of the U.S. population (less than 6%; Jones, 2021), LGBT groups are most targeted by hate crimes (making up almost 20% according to Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). There has also been a recent proliferation of anti-LGBT legislation; Florida passed a bill that restricts mentions of sexual orientation and gender identity in public schools (Call, 2022) and there are efforts in Texas to make gender-affirming care to minors considered child abuse (Lemos et al., 2022). Thus, bias against LGBT groups continues to be a problem in the U.S.

One of the striking things about anti-LGBT bias, that stands in contrast to bias against other minority groups, is that it is seen as being relatively socially acceptable. While social desirability dampens the extent to which White people express racism toward Black people (Morning et al., 2019), concern about social impressions is less relevant for the expression of sexual prejudice (Merritt, 2015). In fact, some religious individuals are

inclined to express sexual prejudice *precisely* because of the solidarity it signals with the ingroup. Many conservative Christian politicians are open about the extent to which they perceive antagonism from LGBT groups (e.g., Portnoy, 2016; Sommerfeldt, 2016). And greater religiosity is associated with greater sexual prejudice (Herek & McLemore, 2013). In other words, religion may exacerbate anti-LGBT bias.

In this article we consider the ways in which bias against LGBT individuals can be exacerbated and mitigated by religious values, and we examine the role religious education plays in shaping those values. We first review evidence that religious primes can heighten bias. We highlight our research on Christian/LGBT zero-sum beliefs (ZSBs)—perceptions that LGBT groups and Christians are in conflict. We examine the origins of Christian/LGBT ZSBs and *why* conservative Christians may be inclined to react negatively to the improving social and political condition of sexual and gender minorities. We describe the consequences of Christian/LGBT zero sum beliefs as they pertain to the expression of sexual prejudice. We describe how religious education, particularly through the stewardship of pastors, may decrease bias against LGBT individuals among some Christians. We end with a discussion of educational programs to mitigate bias.

Religion can exacerbate bias

While religion is a source of morality, it can also drive intergroup prejudice. Across the world, many believe that religion is necessary for the expression of good, and bias against atheists is driven by their perceived immorality (Gervais et al., 2017). Yet, bringing religion to mind often causes individuals to express *greater* bias against some social groups (see, Shariff et al., 2016 for review). For example, experimental studies (that demonstrate causality) have revealed that priming Christian concepts (i.e., Bible, church) increases the extent to which predominantly White students express both racial prejudice and bias against gay men (Johnson et al., 2010; relative to a control condition). The take-away of meta-analyses examining religious priming is that pro-social behavior is often expressed toward perceived *ingroups*, and bias is expressed toward perceived outgroups, or groups seen as violating core ingroup values (Shariff et al., 2016). Thus, one reason priming religion increases bias against sexual minorities is because Christians perceive LGBT groups as violating Christian values (also see, Herek, 1987, 2000).

One might ask how it is possible for groups based on sexual orientation and gender identification to be seen as being at odds with a religious group given overlapping group membership. In fact, most LGBT individuals identify as Christian (Newport, 2014). Despite this reality, our research (Wilkins et al., 2022) reveals that, on-average, Christians perceive the groups as being at odds with one another. Specifically, cisgender, heterosexual Christians are more inclined than other groups (non-Christians and LGBT individuals) to report greater endorsement of zero-sum beliefs: the perceptions that gains for LGBT come at a cost for Christians. They report that LGBT individuals have experienced decreasing bias over time, but that those improvements have corresponded to increases in bias against Christians such that Christians now experience *more* bias than sexual and gender minorities. This zero-sum pattern is particularly apparent among conservative Christians.

The perceived incompatibility of LGBT groups and Christians is exacerbated by religious primes. We (Wilkins et al., 2022) conducted an experiment where a sample of Christian participants¹ were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the *religious* prime condition, Christian participants were asked to report the importance of religion or spirituality in their life and to describe a time when their behavior exemplified their values. In the *control* condition, participants wrote about what they ate the previous day. We found that Christians who reflected on their religious values increased the extent to which they reported zero-sum beliefs about the relationship between Christians and LGBT individuals (relative to the control). In other words, thinking about core religious values, amplifies the perceived incompatibility of the social groups. This implies that Christians interpret their religion as being at odds with the acceptance of LGBT individuals. Why might that be?

Where do beliefs about Christian/LGBT incompatibility come from?

While Jesus is not recorded as addressing sexuality in the gospels, some (particularly conservative or Fundamentalist Christians) may draw their beliefs about sexual and gender minorities from literal interpretations of other Biblical texts. Using this approach, the Bible could be seen as justifying the exclusion of LGBT individuals. For example, Christians may read a passage like Romans 1: 21–27 (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011): a verse that describes sexual impurity and same sex love among women, as evidence that homosexuality is a sin or the result of sin (Active-Christianity, 2015). These literal interpretations are used to vilify sexual minorities based on their sexuality.

The tendency to label perceived outgroups as lascivious is not unique to LGBT groups; in fact, the practice of creating moral distance and portraying outgroups as debauched, dates back to the earliest Christians (J. Knust, 2005). The characterization of immoral sexual behavior, in turn, justifies social distance between groups (avoidance) and elicits perceived deservingness of God's punishment. For example, sexually immoral characterizations of homosexuality in the 1980s motivated Christians to actively lobby against funding and treatment for HIV/AIDS; the illness was understood as a literal interpretation of Romans 1:27, '... Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.' HIV/AIDS was perceived as God's wrath for homosexuality (see, Frame, 1985). In other words, literal Biblical interpretations may increase LGBT/Christian ZSBs, the perceptions that the groups are incompatible, and may be used to justify discrimination against LGBT groups.²

In addition to literal Biblical readings, beliefs about Christian/LGBT incompatibility may arise in response to political rhetoric. Some Christian politicians explicitly highlight conflict between religion and sexual orientation and espouse those beliefs to a broad group of people. Several conservative Christian politicians have explicitly framed civil rights advancements for sexual minorities as conflicting with Christians. For example, Todd Gilbert, a Republican House Delegate, argued that 'The activists who pursue same-sex marriage... are not satisfied with equality and they will not be satisfied until people of faith are driven out of this discourse, are made to cower, are made to be in fear of speaking their minds, of living up to their deeply held religious beliefs.' (Portnoy, 2016). Similarly, while senator, former Attorney General Jeff Sessions described the Supreme Court's decision to legalize same sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015) as an 'effort

to secularize, by force and intimidation’ (Sommerfeldt, 2016). Essentially, several prominent politicians have made direct connections between increasing rights for sexual minorities and anti-Christian bias. These conservative politicians communicate these attitudes on broad platforms and in that way may shape the perceptions of Christians who hear their messages and may thus exacerbate perceived group conflict.

Church structures and policies are another avenue that can communicate (in)compatibility between religious values and acceptance of LGBT individuals. For example, some denominations have explicit rules that prohibit the ordination of gay clergy and performance of same sex marriages (e.g., see the United Methodist Church’s Book of Discipline, 2016). These official stances communicate what is seen as valued by the denomination. If denominational rules state that gay people cannot serve as clergy, it could exacerbate the extent to which members of that denomination believe Christianity and LGBT groups are in conflict.

Bias against LGBT individuals is a consequence of Christian/LGBT ZSBs

Regardless of whether ZSBs are a result of literal interpretations of the Bible, are adopted from politicians, or church structures, they have significant negative consequences for intergroup relations. Our research (Wilkins et al., 2022) demonstrates that Christian/LGBT ZSBs are a strong predictor of prejudice against LGBT groups. And, if a Church ruling exacerbates the perceived conflict, ZSBs become an *even stronger* predictor of bias. Specifically, the 2019 United Methodist Church vote that upheld exclusion of sexual and gender minorities from complete church participation increased the extent to which ZSBs predicted negative LGBT attitudes. Furthermore, individuals who endorse ZSBs report less support for marriage equality and are more inclined to endorse explicit homophobic statements such as ‘Male homosexuality is a perversion.’ Thus, ZSBs predict prejudice.

Importantly, ZSBs also predict perceptions of anti-Christian bias (Wilkins et al., 2022), which in turn, predict other negative outcomes. When politicians perceive anti-Christian bias, it motivates efforts to protect Christians from experiencing discrimination. For example, while Vice President, Mike Pence argued that ‘no people of faith today face greater hostility or hatred than the followers of Christ’ (Remarks by Vice President Pence. . . , 2017). Sentiments like those motivated his administration to develop a religious liberty taskforce, which was viewed by some as providing license to discriminate against LGBT individuals (Wilson-Hartgrove, 2018). In other words, an effort to protect Christian values may in effect sanction discrimination against LGBT groups.

In fact, recent research (Miller & Wilkins, [under review](#)) demonstrates that concern about bias against Christians increases prejudice and discrimination against LGBT individuals. An experiment demonstrates that White Christians primed to perceive anti-Christian bias report more negative attitudes toward gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals (relative to those primed with bias against a non-self-relevant control group). This effect is particularly strong for Christians who perceive that LGBT groups exert a significant amount of cultural influence in society. Importantly, perceiving anti-Christian bias not only causes more negative attitudes (prejudice), but it also increases explicit job *discrimination*. Christians concerned about anti-Christian bias rate a gay applicant as less

hirable for an influential position (relative to non-influential positions). In other words, research demonstrates the serious social and material consequences LGBT individuals may suffer when Christians perceive bias against their own group.

Essentially, religious teachings (whether from the Bible, politicians or because of denominational rules) may imply conflict between Christians and LGBT individuals and that perceived conflict may in turn sanction or exacerbate Christians' bias against LGBT groups. Are there ways to interrupt this process?

Religious teachings can also mitigate bias against LGBT groups

While our review thus far has highlighted the ways in which Christian teachings can contribute to bias against LGBT groups, there are also ways in which Christian teachings can be framed to mitigate bias. This process can happen in a variety of ways: through a focus on God (vs. religion), through particular interpretations of the Bible, and under the guidance of pastors who emphasize accepting and loving understandings of religion.

Although priming religion can increase bias towards outgroups (as reviewed above), priming God can also decrease bias toward those same groups (Preston & Ritter, 2013). Preston and Ritter (2013) argue that religion increases outgroup bias because religion is tied to group identity and thus heightens affiliative concerns related to group practice. In contrast, God primes a higher moral authority and leads to more generous intergroup attitudes. In fact, Pasek et al. (2020) find that religious individuals (Christians, Muslims, and Hindus) believe that God has more favorable views of religious outgroup members than the self. In general, the take-away from this research is that God appeals to a higher moral standing than organized religion and could likely be referenced to reduce negative intergroup attitudes.

Our experimental research (Wilkins et al., 2022) demonstrates that particular Bible passages (and corresponding interpretations) can also mitigate Christians' bias against LGBT groups. In one study we asked cisgender heterosexual Christians³ to reflect on a Bible passage that highlighted acceptance. Specifically, Christian study participants read a passage about a group that brings an adulteress to Jesus who tells them that the person without sin should condemn the woman. No one does (8: 3–11 NIV). The vast majority of our participants interpreted the passage as exemplifying social acceptance, and that interpretation, in turn, reduced the extent to which Christians expressed bias against LGBT groups. Specifically, reading that Bible passage decreased the extent to which mainline Christians endorsed zero-sum beliefs, reduced their negative attitudes towards gay people, and significantly increased Christians' support for same-sex marriage (relative to other conditions—which involved reflecting on a different Biblical or literary passage). In fact, support for same sex marriage increased enough to indicate support (vs. neutral attitudes) toward same sex marriage after reading the accepting Bible verse. Thus, we found evidence that reading particular Biblical passages decreases sexual prejudice among some (non-fundamentalist) Christians.

What was particularly striking about this study was not only that the Bible passage decreased bias, as we hoped it would, but that individual interpretations mattered (see, Wilkins et al., 2022 supplemental analyses). After reading the passages, we asked participants to report the meaning in their own words. Qualitative coding revealed that while some interpreted the experimental passage as demonstrating social acceptance, others

(particularly fundamentalist Christians) read the same passage as implying that Jesus was condemning sin. When we analyzed the data based on interpretation, we found that interpretations mattered. Specifically, when people interpreted a passage in an accepting way, their social attitudes matched that interpretation and reflected less bias. This provides a potential place to meaningfully intervene on sexual and gender prejudice. If pastors help shape Biblical interpretations toward more acceptance, it could likely meaningfully decrease Christian/LGBT ZSBs and anti-LGBT bias.

In fact, our other research (Wilkins et al., [under review](#)) demonstrates the important role that pastors may play in mitigating bias in their congregations. We conducted interviews with United Methodist parishioners of four Saint Louis churches after the United Methodist Church vote to maintain exclusionary language in the Book of Discipline (Steele, 2019). We spoke with individuals from liberal and dissenting congregations who were overwhelmingly disappointed by the vote outcome. Our interviews revealed that parishioners' understandings of God, scripture, their religion, and place in community were shaped by their pastor's leadership.

The pastors leading churches in our sample openly discussed the issues of same sex marriage and the ordination of gay clergy with their congregations. They also held votes within their own communities to decide whether to become a reconciling congregation (to welcome all regardless of gender identity and sexuality: Reconciling Ministries Network, n.d.), and several decided to accept LGBT individuals despite the broader denominational ruling.

Given the disconnect between the denomination and the local congregation, most of the UMC-churchgoers we interviewed reported identifying more strongly with their local communities than with the broader UMC church. We found this by examining the extent to which participants reported identifying with the different institutions using quantitative self-report measures. We also utilized a grounded theory approach to identify themes discussed in the qualitative interviews. Many participants talked about how the vote had pushed them to engage in greater pro-LGBT advocacy and activism. Several participants explicitly mentioned their pastor's own activism as motivating their desire to increase commitment to LGBT equality within the church. For example, one participant specifically decided to become a formal church member after seeing the pastor stand up for LGBT parishioners. Others described being compelled to become active allies and fight for justice within the greater denomination and more broadly throughout the world.

In essence, our research also demonstrates the important role that pastors and religious teachings play in mitigating the relationship between religion and bias against LGBT groups. In fact, it suggests that religious teachings can be harnessed to reduce Christian/LGBT zero-sum beliefs and the expression of sexual prejudice within Christian communities. Pastors can also serve as an example of acceptance to their congregations. We next turn to recommendations for clergy and lay people for how to combat anti-LGBT bias.

Educational recommendations for combating anti-LGBT bias

There are several efforts that individuals and groups can engage in to reduce bias against the LGBT community. While the targets of our educational recommendations vary, the overall effort is to convey that *there are multiple ways of being Christian* in order to combat perceptions that Christianity is wholesale anti-LGBT.

Our first recommendation is to convey to Christian individuals and communities that *there are different understandings of Christianity and its relationship to sexuality*. There is not one way to be Christian or one Christian sexual orientation, nor a singular Christian sexual ethics (see, Sorett, 2022 for a discussion of these issues in the Black church).

For the purpose of increasing acceptance of socially marginalized groups, we discourage literal treatments of the Bible, as there are multiple ways to construe the same words. For example, Romans 1: 21–27 (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011) is a passage that is often taken to condemn homosexuality and describes men committing ‘shameful acts with other men.’ Non-literal interpretations conclude that passage does not condemn same-sex relationships per se, but rather that the passage condemns lustful relationships and idolatry more broadly (e.g., see, Markham, n.d.).

In fact, a broader reading of the Bible recognizes that there are a myriad of contradictions regarding sex and sexual desire (J. W. Knust, 2012). Jennifer Knust for example, argues that a polygamist marriage is a central assumption of the Old Testament, but celibacy and singleness is a central assumption of the New Testament (Gross, 2011). Further, Knust stresses that historically some Christians read a passage in Matthew about how people should be eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven, as literally meaning that they ought to castrate themselves (rather than indicating celibacy). A more constructive way to treat the Bible (rather than literally) is to consider historical context and how that context may have shaped writers’ perspectives. Knust argues that true Biblical understanding becomes elusive when individuals pick out particular Bible verses. Her message is to step back and consider that the Bible was written by people who love God and who did their best (given their context, history etc.) to convey that love (Gross, 2011).

We also recommend that pastors, congregations, and individuals engage in educational efforts to learn more about the history of the Bible. There is not just one ‘true’ version, but rather a myriad of versions and interpretations that have been used to justify particular social purposes. While in this article we have primarily reviewed connections between Christian teachings and sexual prejudice, there is also a long history connecting the Bible to racial bias in the US. White Evangelical Christians have used the Bible to justify their racist goals (Butler, 2021): to justify slavery (even creating a *slave Bible* that emphasized obedience), to oppose racial integration, civil rights, and, more recently, a Muslim immigration ban. In contrast, others have used the Bible and messages of love to combat those very same efforts like Christian abolitionists (see David Walker’s *Appeal*). Written in 1829, the text is a prime example of how some 19th century abolitionists used scripture to oppose slavery and racial discrimination. Advocates of the civil rights movement also employed scripture to support their causes (Marsh, 2008). In other words, differing interpretations can lead to either efforts to maintain White dominance and social inequality, or to efforts to reduce social bias. It is thus critical that Christians understand that multiple interpretations exist and for pastors to recognize and teach about that as well.

This leads to our next recommendation to pastors and congregations: *teach about God’s love*. We urge pastors to be attentive to the message they convey about the Bible and what aspects they choose to emphasize. A focus on God’s love and Jesus’ acceptance, according to our research, will reduce Christians’ bias against LGBT groups (Wilkins et al., 2022).

We also recommend several *educational initiatives*. These efforts can occur in formal college settings: for example, in a class on the Sociology of Religion. That kind of class might explicitly tie social outcomes to religious practice or understandings. It could demonstrate the role that religion plays (has played) in shaping social policy and political life more broadly. Furthermore, pastors can organize sermon series that examine the history of Bible versions and emphasize that there are a myriad of ways to read meaning in the same Biblical words. Finally, congregations/churches could organize adult education courses to teach about the aforementioned issues. For all these efforts, we recommend the following reading list, which highlights Biblical contradictions, diversity in scripture reading, and the ways in which claims about sexuality have been historically used to demonize perceived outgroups. In other words, they all recognize the ways in which the Biblical interpretations can shape real world outcomes:

Knust, J. W. (2012). *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire* (Reprint edition). HarperOne.

Sorett, J. (Ed.). (2022). *The Sexual Politics of Black Churches*. Columbia University Press.

Knust, J. (2005). *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity*. Columbia University Press.

It is important to note that our proposals may be most effective at mitigating bias among Christians who are somewhat open to variable interpretations. It is possible that those who have staunch views about same sex marriage or sexual orientation will be harder to influence than individuals with more ambiguous perceptions. This is consistent with our evidence that Biblical interpretations varied more among mainline than fundamentalist Christians, who read the Bible literally (see Study 4 supplemental analyses in Wilkins et al., 2022).

Conclusion

In summary, religious and Biblical education can be both a cause of greater social bias and can be harnessed to reduce bias and discrimination against LGBT groups. We propose that education about the historical and shifting interpretations of the Bible may be a potential avenue that individuals, religious communities, and pastors can utilize to combat anti-LGBT bias.

Notes

1. This was a broad sample of Christians of various races and denominations recruited online through Mturk panels via TurkPrime (Litman et al., 2016).
2. In fact, Fundamentalist Christians (those who believe in literal Biblical truth; Smidt (1988)) do endorse ZSBs to a greater extent than mainline Christians (Wilkins et al., 2022).
3. This sample was of various races and denominations recruited online through the Mturk platform (described in footnote 1).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by a grant funded as part of the Self, Virtue and Public Life Project, a three-year research initiative based at the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing at the University of Oklahoma. Funded with generous support from the Templeton Religion Trust.

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