

Conservative Christian Attitudes and Beliefs about Homosexuality

Aubyn Fulton, Danielle Hagood, and Carol Grady

Adventists and LGBs

Like many conservative protestant Christian denominations, the Seventh Day Adventist church has formally voted to oppose homosexual practices and relationships (Adventist Position Statement on Homosexuality, 2012). In the past, the attitude of conservative Christian churches would have been indistinguishable from the larger American cultural context. It is unclear how the increasingly tolerant views of the larger culture (see CNN Political Unit, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2012) have affected the attitudes and beliefs of conservative Christians. The current study is a first step in clarifying this, with particular focus on the Seventh Day Adventist denomination in the United States.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church is a Christian denomination founded in the United States in 1863, emerging from the Millerite movement in the 1840s. While Adventists are known for attending church on Saturday and observing a strict diet, in many respects they are similar to other conservative Christian denominations that interpret the Bible literally. It is one of the fastest growing protestant Christian churches, with more than 17 million members worldwide, including 1.1 million in the United States and Canada (Seventh Day Adventist Church, North American Division, 2002-2013).

A search of the published literature in the behavioral sciences yielded no studies of Adventist attitudes toward homosexuality. However, members of conservative protestant denominations have significantly more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than more moderate or liberal denominations (see for example, Henley & Pincus 1978; Wills & Crawford, 2000). Various measures of religious fundamentalism are associated with more negative attitudes towards homosexuality (see Gorsuch & Fulton, 2012 for a recent review).

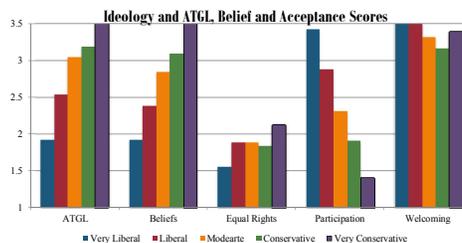
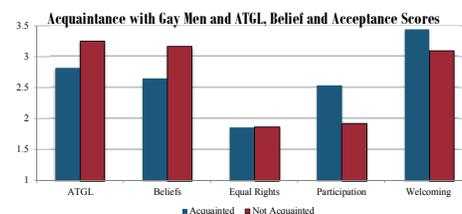
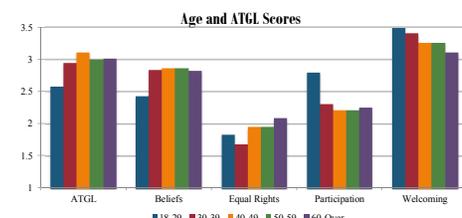
Several variables have been found to correlate with negative attitudes toward homosexuality: Heterosexuals reporting greater contact with LGBs report less negative attitudes (see Ellis & Vasseur, 1993; Herek & Capitano, 1996). Younger people (Johnson & Alford-Keating, 1997) and women (see Finley and Walther, 2000) both report less negative attitudes. The role of ethnicity is less clear. In a 2009 Pew Poll African-Americans reported less support for homosexuality (40%) than the total population (50%), but this is potentially conflated with the higher rates of religious participation in the African-American community (Pew Research Center, 2009). A recent study of American undergraduate students found that ethnicity was only marginally associated with attitudes toward homosexuality (Woodford, Silverschanz, Swank, Scherrer, & Raiz, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

To identify a meaningful sample of American Adventists and survey them about their attitudes toward and beliefs about LGBs. Further, we attempt to describe the relationship of variables like gender, age, ethnicity, interpersonal contact and ideology to attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality within this religious community.

Abstract

We explore the sentiments toward gay men, lesbians and bisexuals (LGBs) of the American members of one conservative Christian denomination, Seventh Day Adventists. Of 991 adults who were invited to take our survey, 441 (48%) completed one. Our instrument included the short form of the Attitudes Toward Gay Men, and Attitudes Toward Lesbians survey and additional items assessing other attitudes and beliefs. Exploratory regression analysis suggested that six variables explained 33% of the variance in the attitude measure (adjusted $R^2 = .334$, $F(6,434) = 37.73$, $p < .001$): Ideology, acquaintance with gay men, age; acquaintance with lesbians; black ethnic identity; and gender. While as expected large majorities did agree with negative attitudes about LGBs, agreed that homosexuality was a sin and that LGBs should not be allowed to hold leadership positions in local churches, there was also evidence of more nuance in the sentiments of this group than might be commonly assumed.



Participants

In the spring of 2012 we randomly selected 38 Adventist churches in the United States and asked their pastors to distribute the invitation to take our survey to their members. Twelve of the 38 pastors (31.5%) agreed. We estimated that 919 adults received our invitation; 441 completed surveys (48%). The ethnicity and gender distribution of our sample was fairly similar to population estimates (see Sahlin and Richardson, 2008, and Kellner, 2012). However our sample significantly underrepresented older adults (9% 65 and older, vs. 30% in the population).

Materials

The survey consisted of 24 questions, and was administered electronically via Survey Monkey. Surveys included items related to demographics, beliefs, attitudes, and acceptance. The main attitude measure was the combined Attitudes toward Lesbians [ATL] and Attitudes toward Gay Men [ATG] scales (Herek 2002)

Results & Discussion

The mean ATGL score for the sample was negative (2.93 on a 4-point scale). While 88% did agree that homosexuality was a sin, only around half believed that homosexuality is voluntary, can be changed, and that Adventists should oppose gay marriage, and more than three quarters disagreed with the belief that homosexuals do not have equal housing and employment rights as other Americans.

While three quarters were opposed to homosexuals serving as deacons, elders or Sabbath school teachers, about half agreed that homosexuals should be allowed to be members of the church, and even get baptized while still living with a same sexed romantic partner, and 94% agreed that homosexuals should be welcomed in Adventist churches.

Exploratory multiple regression analysis indicated that six variables together explained 33.4% of the variance in ATGL scores (adjusted $R^2 = .334$, $F(6,434) = 37.73$, $p < .001$). In order the predictors were: ideology; acquaintance with gay men, age; acquaintance with lesbians; black ethnic identity; and gender.

These results are consistent with earlier data suggesting that conservative Christians are capable of more nuanced sentiments, distinguishing between their negative moral judgments about homosexuality and their social and political treatment of LGBs (see Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999; Gorsuch & Fulton, 2012).

While most of the Adventists in this sample had negative sentiments about LGBs, we found significant age and Acquaintance effects (with younger subjects, and those better acquainted with LGBs reporting much less negative sentiments). This suggests that conservative Christian groups, while perhaps lagging behind national American sentiment, are likely to become more positive toward LGBs in the future.