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Ex-gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Jones, Stanton L. and Mark A. Yarhouse. *Ex-gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007, 414pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-2846-3. Reviewed by Daniel F. A. Hitchcock, Associate Professor of Psychology, Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA.

Since the late 1990s, the issue of “reparative,” “reorientation,” or “conversion” therapy for homosexuals has been contentious in both the public square and the professional psychological community. The prevailing professional opinion of both the American Psychiatric Association¹ (who publishes the undisputed diagnostic standards for psychopathology) and the American Psychological Association² (the agency which accredits most professional counseling degree programs in the United States) has been two-fold. First, any attempt to change sexual orientation is doomed to fail because enduring traits of personality, such as sexual orientation, just cannot be changed. Second, not only is such an attempt impossible but it is professionally unethical due to the psychological harm it may inflict on clients.

These views, held firmly by the cultural and professional establishment, are adeptly challenged by the research reported in this volume. The book is written by two Christian psychologists, Stanton Jones, psychology professor and provost of Wheaton College (IL), and Mark Yarhouse, a licensed clinical psychologist and professor of psychology and director of the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity at Regent University (VA). Jones and Yarhouse are well-qualified to participate in the debate, as they have each published numerous articles and reviews in this hotly contested area. Their most noted work, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (2000), succinctly and critically reviews the scientific research used to support the prevailing opinions that sexual orientation is immutable, natural, and therefore morally acceptable. This former work was intended for use by the Church as a resource in the on-going debates about homosexuals participating in church life and leadership.

The current work will again benefit the Church, but its primary audiences are the professional and academic communities of psychology, psychiatry, and related social sciences. Nonetheless, pastors, students, and any who desire to keep abreast of the controversies about homosexuality will benefit from reading this volume.

The book is organized into ten chapters, with the first three laying out a careful rationale for a large longitudinal, prospective study (i.e., current on-going assessment rather than a retrospective snapshot), given the methodological weaknesses of previous studies addressing the issue. Chapter 1 identifies the two opposing positions: the

current opinion of the professional establishment versus (primarily from the religious community) anecdotal claims that that change can take place and has taken place for many homosexuals. Jones and Yarhouse suggest that, regardless of which side one takes, all should recognize the need for well-designed, empirical inquiry of the absolute statements put forward by both sides. They make a convincing argument that the claim that sexual orientation is unchangeable could be falsified simply by documenting a single case of true fundamental change. Retrospective anecdotal evidence, however, is not convincing proof. In Chapter 2 the authors discuss homosexuality in the context of a biblical Christian view of sexuality and the responses that Christianity has traditionally taken toward those of same-sex orientation. They also present the rationale and alternative interpretations of those Christians that depart from the traditional view. Chapter 3 reviews the sexual-orientation-change literature and highlights the paucity of good methodology, pointing out the need for unbiased, methodologically-sound studies to address the issue.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the authors' design of their research study. Jones and Yarhouse started with a group of 98 participants (72 men, 26 women) that were seeking to change their sexual orientation via Christian-based ministries (i.e., Exodus International Ministries). They did not randomly assign homosexuals to groups receiving therapy or no therapy but merely followed this cohort of people who were at the beginning stages of seeking change. Over a three-year period, the individuals were assessed via in-depth interviews as well as five well-established self-report measures of sexual identity and attraction. One interesting demographic finding was that nearly two-thirds of those in the study were sexualized early in life (before age 13), compared to only 12% (men) to 17% (women) for the American population in general.³ This finding is significant, given that many who oppose the position that homosexuality is a sexual dysfunction claim that environmental factors (such as sexual abuse in early childhood) have little impact upon sexual orientation.

Chapters 7 and 8 present quantitative and qualitative results of the study. These are the most difficult chapters, as the details are exhaustive; however, the reasons for this detail are clear: to be transparent and to silence critics. The results were very interesting. Over the three-year period, 15-19% of the sample reported “conversion” from homosexuality

to heterosexuality, while 38-45% demonstrated positive change away from homosexuality on a scale from exclusive homosexuality to bisexuality to exclusive heterosexuality. Change in sexual orientation did occur for some, and the process showed no deleterious psychological consequences, either for those experiencing change or not.

The final two chapters discuss the implications of the findings. The fact that one-third actually “failed” at the attempt implies that Christian therapy is not a magic potion instantly curing all who seek reorientation. On the other hand, the overall results demonstrate very convincingly that for some, change is possible, especially for those highly motivated and supported to do so. Jones and Yarhouse conclude, “We found empirical evidence that change of homosexual orientation may be possible through involvement in Exodus ministries, either (1) in the form of an embrace of chastity with a reduction in prominence of homosexual desire, or (2) in the form of a diminishing of homosexual attraction and an increase in heterosexual attraction with resulting satisfactory heterosexual adjustment” (364).

There are several limitations to the study, many of which are honestly highlighted by Jones and Yarhouse. The final sample of 73 was significantly fewer than the 300 for which they were hoping, and the loss of one-third of the original 98 at the three-year mark is disappointing. However, this is not atypical for longitudinal research. Another issue for which many will cry “foul” is that the funding for the study was provided by Exodus International—the umbrella organization of the very ministries that were providing the therapy under investigation. In order to dispel accusations of conflict of interest, Jones and Yarhouse transparently go into painstaking detail—almost too much—throughout the 414 pages of the book. The reason the results are tough to wade through is that raw counts rather than percentages are displayed in many of the tables. Although a long read for a research study, it is the first of its kind and will no doubt prove itself to be an influential work in the field.

How has the professional community responded to the Jones and Yarhouse study? One positive indication is that they were selected to present the results of a three-year follow-up (indicating continued change for those

in the original study) at the August 2009 meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA) in Toronto, Canada. Ironically, however, at the same conference just three days before their presentation (which was scheduled on the final conference day—Sunday—at 8 a.m.), the APA governing council adopted a resolution reaffirming the position that therapeutic efforts to help homosexuals desiring to change are not effective and that such therapy should be avoided because it may be harmful. This mixed reception for Jones and Yarhouse’s work indicates a long road ahead. I am reminded that physicist Max Planck once said, “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”⁴ Although many in the professional establishment are ignoring contrary findings, there is hope for paradigm change ahead if this type of careful inquiry continues to be carried out.

Endnotes

1. *American Psychiatric Association (2008). Therapies Focused on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation (Reparative or Conversion Therapies)*. Arlington, VA: Author. [Retrieved from www.psych.org/Departments/EDU/Library/APAOfficialDocumentsandRelated/PositionStatements/200001a.aspx.]
2. *American Psychological Association. (2008). Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality*. Washington, DC: Author. [Retrieved from www.apa.org/topics/sorientation.pdf.]
3. In order to allow for comparison with a national sample, Jones and Yarhouse used the same questions used in the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), which is a well-regarded national survey of adult sexual history and behavior.
4. Jones and Yarhouse, 364.
5. See Max Planck, *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*, trans. F. Gaynor (New York, 1949), 33-34.

Klapwijk, Jacob, *Purpose in the Living World? Creation and Emergent Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 311 pages, ISBN-978-0-521-72943-7.

Meyer, Stephen C., *Signature in the Cell. DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009. 611 pages, ISBN-978-0-06-147278-7.

Reviewed by Tony Jelsma, Professor of Biology, Dordt College.

In the seemingly endless stream of books that deal with the so-called creation-evolution debate, one might question the value of reading about yet two more in this area. However, by comparing and contrasting these two books, I

hope to show that they both address a fundamental concept that is often overlooked in this debate, namely that living things have properties which cannot be reduced to physical laws. While both authors argue for this irreducibility in