

Honest Intentions, Problematic Results: Sexual Identity Therapy

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As support for sexual reorientation therapy—the practice of trying to change an individual’s sexual orientation—has lulled¹, various therapists have been faced with the question of how to effectively and respectfully counsel their religious clients who are at odds with their sexual orientation. They appear to be faced with two options, a sexuality affirming approach and a newer approach known as sexual identity therapy. In my presentation, I will give a brief overview of these two approaches as described in the work of Mark A. Yarhouse and A. Lee Beckstead in “Using Group Therapy in Order to Navigate and Resolve Sexual Orientation and Religious Conflicts” and the approach to therapy described by Naomi Mark in her article “Identities in Conflict: Forging an Orthodox Gay Identity.” I will then outline the similarities and differences between these two approaches. Finally, I will argue that the approach outlined by Mark, while not completely at odds with the approach Yarhouse and Beckstead describe, is more ethically sound and helpful than the approach that Yarhouse and Beckstead describe. I will conclude that, due to factors such as ignoring the lack of viability of mixed orientation marriages and the potentially overwhelming impact of therapist bias in sexual identity therapy, sexual identity therapy is not preferable to the sexuality-affirming approach that Mark describes. As Mark shows, it is possible to conceive of and practice a sexuality-affirming approach to therapy that respects the individual’s religious orientation and sexual orientation without being overtly directive. Because of this, the sexuality-affirming approach that Mark describes is more desirable than the sexual identity therapy approach that Yarhouse and Beckstead advocate.

¹ See Regional Ethics Bowl Case Brief #8. Also see Mimi Swartz NY Times article “Living the Good Lie” and Hancock, Kristin A. Terry S. Gock and Douglas C. Haldeman’s academic article “Science Meets Practice in Determining Effectiveness of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts.”