

College students likely to disagree with religious teachings that homosexuality is a sin

July 17 2012, by Jared Wadley

(Phys.org) -- College students' beliefs about same-sex relationships can be shaped by their church's teachings, but some are willing to oppose their religion's position on the issue, a new University of Michigan study indicated.

And this can influence students' views about same-sex [marriage](#).

Researchers looked at whether or not [respondents'](#) [religion](#) taught that homosexuality was a sin and students' level of agreement with these teachings, which is described as syncretism.

Syncretism concerning same-sex sexuality plays a small but unique role in explaining opinions about attitudes toward same-sex marriage, beyond that of religious tradition, participation in services and importance of religion in one's life, says Michael Woodford, assistant professor of social work and the study's lead author.

"And what's most important, syncretism really matters for students who belong to religions that teach being gay is a sin," he said.

Woodford and colleagues collected data by using an anonymous Internet-based survey, with a sample consisting of nearly 1,100 [students](#) of various faiths. The respondents answered questions about their religion, its teachings on homosexuality, the frequency they attended [religious](#)

[services](#), and how important religion is to them.

While the researchers found high support for same-sex marriage, they also found that respondents affiliated with denominations that affirm homosexuality generally endorse same-sex marriage more than respondents affiliated with denominations that maintain that same-sex sexuality is a sin.

"Also, the more the individual's personal beliefs about same-sex sexuality are consistent with the teachings of anti-gay denomination, the lower is the rate of endorsement of same-sex marriage," Woodford said.

In other words, if someone belongs to a church that teaches being gay is a sin, the effect of those teachings on the person's endorsement of same-sex marriage depends on how consistent his personal beliefs are with those teachings.

The study's results highlight the complexity of religion and attitudes about controversial policy issues like same-sex marriage.

"Just because a person belongs to a homophobic religion, doesn't mean their [personal beliefs](#) line up with their church's teachings," Woodford said. "The same can be true for gay-affirming religions."

The results remind advocates for same-sex marriage not to assume that religiously affiliated individuals who belong to conservative religions will oppose same-sex marriage. In fact, researchers found that a large percentage of respondents, including individuals affiliated with anti-gay denominations, supported same-sex marriage.

"Part of religious life today involves thinking critically about what ones personal religious beliefs are, and these are not necessarily congruent with the doctrine of one's religion," he said.

Woodford collaborated on the research with N. Eugene Walls, associate professor at the University of Denver, and Denise Levy, assistant professor of [social work](#) at Appalachian State University.

The findings appear in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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