

## **The Hands of the Holy: Re-Envisioning LGBT Welcome in Faith Communities**

By Amanda Udis-Kessler and Phoebe Lostroh; published in *Tikkun Magazine*, July/August 2010

It's time to develop new, compelling arguments about why faith communities should eagerly welcome and fully include LGBT people, arguments not based on the claim that people "can't help" being lesbian or gay.

Many Christian denominations and some strands of Judaism remain resistant to full inclusion, suggesting that they do not find the "no choice" argument compelling. This may be because many Christians and some Jews still find ex-gay narratives convincing despite the movement's larger social discrediting.

Moreover, despite claims about "gay genes" and other deterministic elements of sexual identity, both scientific and social scientific evidence suggests that sexual identity is more flexible over time, for more people, than fits neatly into the "no choice" paradigm. Consider Alfred Kinsey's findings, or the presence of situational male homosexuality in settings like prisons. It is one thing to experience one's sexuality as a given and quite another to demonstrate that homosexuality is biologically determined. The extent of sexual fluidity over individual lives, throughout history, and across societies suggests that there is no clearly definable biological "homosexuality" trait; therefore, there is no deterministic causal explanation of homosexuality.

Yet another problem with the "no choice" argument is that it does not provide a solid foundation for welcoming and fully including bisexual people, some of whom would say there are elements of choice in their sexuality.

It will take courageous work on the part of many people to build new religious models of inclusion; ideas such as the following may represent a jumping-off point. If developed further, such ideas may be invigorating to those of us on the side of a human welcome that matches our understanding of the Holy's welcome.

- The Jewish commitment to healing the world acknowledges that the Holy has no hands but ours. All of our hands are needed to repair what is broken, just as all of our insights are needed to solve the problems we face, all of our spiritual wisdom is needed to strengthen us for the work ahead, and all of our blessings are needed to hallow the work and the world. LGBT people should be eagerly welcomed into faith communities because our hands are ready to carry out repairs, our insights and wisdom are at the world's disposal, and our blessings are as sturdy as anyone else's. How we came to our sexuality does not matter. How we practice our generosity, compassion, humility, and gratitude does.
- Encounters with the Holy are always a product of their times; we meet the sacred from our particular social circumstances. In a society that too easily veers toward the disconnected, isolated and individualistic, we need to encounter a G-d of connection, intimacy, and extravagance, one who is more concerned with our ability to love than with how body parts mix and match. Faith communities should welcome LGBT people as part of a rigorous commitment to the best of what love means.

- We are also beset by fundamentalisms on all sides, and deeply need reminders that the Holy not only does new things but specifically lifts up and cherishes new people, ever expanding the circle of sacredness. LGBT people have often been understood, not merely as non-religious, but as the antithesis of all that is good about religion. Faith communities should energetically invite LGBT people in order to signal their commitment to religion that grows and changes, always in the direction of enlarging the circle.

Ultimately, the “no choice” argument is defensive. We need to envision and develop proactive approaches that honor our religious yearnings and the sacred gifts we can bring, and that jettison defensiveness for the open-heartedness that is our birthright and our hope.

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