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## **Perceptions of Lesbian and Gay (LG) Individuals as Desecrators of Christianity as Predictors of Anti-LG Attitudes**

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*This study applied religious coping theory to examine the relationship between participants' perceptions that lesbian and gay (LG) individuals desecrate Christian values (the stressor) and anti-LG attitudes (the response) and whether religious coping influences the relationship between these variables. Greater agreement with desecration messages was associated with higher levels of anti-LG attitudes. Positive religious coping was associated with lower levels of anti-LG attitudes while negative religious coping was associated with higher levels. Greater exposure to messages that LG individuals desecrate Christian values was associated with greater agreement with those messages. Longitudinal studies with more diverse samples are needed to examine causality and the generalizability of the findings. However, these results have implications for preventing and mitigating anti-LG attitudes.*

**KEYWORDS** *desecration, gay, lesbian, prejudice, religious coping*

In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old University of Wyoming college student, was kidnapped, beaten and tortured, tied to a fence, and left to die. He was found 18 hours later and taken to the hospital. Doctors discovered skull fractures and brain stem damage so severe that surgery was impossible. He never regained consciousness and died five days later. Witnesses at the trial of the two men convicted of the murder testified that Shepard was targeted because he was gay. During Shepard's funeral, members of the Westboro Baptist Church, led by Fred Phelps, picketed, holding signs with Shepard's picture that read "Matt in Hell" and "the wages of gay sin is death" (Patterson, 2005, p. 163).

Research indicates that more than half of the adults in the United States have negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay (LG) individuals and their behaviors (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). These attitudes have been associated with physical aggression, as exemplified in the case of Matthew Shepard, as well as verbal aggression and avoidance of LG individuals (Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, & Zeichner, 2001; Franklin, 2000; Patel, Long, McCammon, & Wuensch, 1995; Schope & Eliason, 2000). Consistent with these findings, the prevalence of sexual hate crimes in the United States is high. In a national probability sample, 21% of gay men and lesbians reported being the victim of actual or attempted crimes based on their sexual orientation at least once (Herek, 2009). Over 10% reported experiencing housing or employment discrimination based on sexual orientation (Herek, 2009).

These crimes have a significant negative impact on their victims. Individuals who are the victims of crimes due to their sexual orientation report higher levels of depression, traumatic stress, anxiety, and anger than victims of crimes not related to sexual orientation (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). These results and the case of Matthew Shepard demonstrate the prevalence and intensity of anti-LG attitudes. In addition, the documented tension some LG individuals feel between their sexual and Christian identities and between themselves and Christian family members and fellow church parishioners (Barton, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010) suggests that religiousness plays an important role in understanding anti-LG attitudes.

The link between types of religiousness and prejudice toward minority groups is well documented (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Two recent studies applied a religious coping model to attempt to understand this link and found that prejudicial views toward Jews and Muslims were associated with the perception that these groups violated Christian values (Abu Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, & Trevino, 2008; Pargament, Trevino, Mahoney, & Silberman, 2007). However, this model has only been applied to attitudes toward other religious denominations. The current study builds on this previous research by applying religious coping theory to anti-LG attitudes. Specifically, we examine the relationship between participants' perceptions that LG individuals desecrate Christian values (the stressor) and anti-LG attitudes (the response). Second, we explore

whether use of religious coping strategies to deal with this stressor is associated with anti-LG attitudes. Finally, we examine predictors of perceptions of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity.

## RELIGION AND PREJUDICE: THEORY AND RESEARCH

A review of the literature on religion and prejudice found that higher levels of religiousness were associated with greater prejudice in 37 of 47 studies (Batson et al., 1993). In a review of 16 articles on the relationship between various types of religiousness (intrinsic, extrinsic, quest, and religious fundamentalism) and intolerance, over half (59%) of the results indicated a positive relationship between religiousness and intolerance for various groups (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005).

This paradoxical relationship between religion and prejudice has been the focus of research for decades. In an attempt to understand this relationship, researchers have examined the associations between more specific forms of religiousness and prejudice. For example, higher levels of prejudice have been associated with greater religious fundamentalism (see Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003, for a review), more frequent church attendance (Scheepers, Gijssberts, & Hello, 2002), and greater religious particularism or the belief that one's religion is the only true religion (Scheepers et al., 2002). However, a quest religious orientation, in which religion is viewed as a search for meaning, has been associated with less prejudice (Batson et al., 1993). Researchers have also investigated the role of personality variables in the relationship between religiousness and prejudice. The results of this work indicate that the relationship between religious fundamentalism and prejudice diminishes significantly after controlling for the effects of right-wing authoritarianism, or adherence to conservative traditional political and social beliefs (Hunsberger, 1995; Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001; Rowatt & Franklin, 2004).

The current research on religiousness and prejudice has significantly informed our understanding of the relationship between these constructs. However, important limitations of the research provide direction for future studies. First, the correlations between prejudice and religiousness vary widely ( $r=.12-.56$ ) and suggest that other unidentified variables are impacting this relationship (Hunsberger, Owosu, & Duck, 1999; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). Second, researchers have primarily assessed global religious variables, such as religious attendance rather than focusing on specific aspects of religiousness that may be more closely associated with prejudice (Spilka et al., 2003). Finally, empirical research on religion and prejudice has focused on personological variables such as stable religious and personality traits (Pargament et al., 2007). With some exceptions (Batson & Burris, 1994; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999), research

in this area of religious study has not empirically examined the role of context and intergroup dynamics in the relationship between Christian and LG individuals.

## RELIGION AND SEXUAL PREJUDICE

Consistent with research on other forms of prejudice, studies of sexual prejudice reveal that higher levels of prejudice are associated with higher levels of fundamentalist religiosity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Herek & Capitano, 1999; Hunsberger, Owusu, & Duck, 1999; Rowatt, Tsang, Kelly, LeMartina, McCullers, & McKinley, 2006), Christian orthodoxy (e.g., Rowatt et al., 2006), and conservative Christian ideology (e.g., Burdette, Ellison, & Hill, 2005; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000), more frequent religious attendance (e.g., Burdette et al., 2005; Herek & Capitano, 1999), and lower levels of quest orientation (e.g., Batson et al., 1993). Notably, the relationship between sexual prejudice and religiousness appears to differ in some ways from the relationship between religiousness and racial prejudice. Unlike racial prejudice, which correlates with extrinsic but not intrinsic religiousness, some research suggests that sexual prejudice correlates with intrinsic more so than extrinsic religiousness (Herek, 1987; Kirkpatrick, 1993; Tsang & Rowatt, 2007). In addition, general religiousness was a stronger predictor of sexual prejudice than racial prejudice in a recent study (Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froese, & Tsang, 2009).

Social identity theory provides a possible framework for understanding the relationship between religiousness and anti-LG attitudes. Social identity is defined as the part of the self-concept that is based on membership in a group (Brown, 2000; Tajfel, 1982). This social identity is created, in part, through intergroup comparisons that distinguish the ingroup from the outgroup. Individuals make intergroup comparisons that favor the ingroup in order to create a positive social identity (Brown & Williams, 1984; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Research indicating that anti-LG attitudes are tolerated by religious organizations (Batson & Stocks, 2005; Duck & Hunsberger, 1999) may be evidence of this intergroup comparison process. Religious organizations may create a shared negative view of LG individuals that solidifies and protects the status and identity of the religious community (Herek, 2004; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). Consistent with this theory, Herek (2004) hypothesized that the Christian right criticized LG individuals in the 1990s to affirm the group affiliation and identity of the Christian right as "good and virtuous" (p. 13).

## RELIGIOUS COPING THEORY

General coping theory is based on various assumptions that are relevant to understanding the relationship between religiousness and prejudice. First,

coping theory assumes that human phenomena are complex and must be considered in the context of ongoing interactions between individuals and life events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pargament, 1997). In addition, coping theory assumes that individuals are proactive and goal directed. Individuals search for meaning and significance and appraise life events based on the implications of the events for whatever is important and valuable to the individual. When these important values are challenged, threatened, or lost, individuals engage in coping strategies to either conserve or transform their framework of significance.

Religious coping theory adds to this general coping theory by focusing on the sacred as part of the search for significance. The sacred is defined as divine beings, higher powers, God, or transcendent reality (Pargament, 1999). The sacred also includes other aspects of life that acquire spiritual significance through their association with the divine. This process of gaining spiritual significance through association with the divine is called sanctification (Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, *in press*; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Through the process of sanctification, any aspect of life can be considered sacred including people (e.g., religious leaders), time (e.g., Sabbath), and places (e.g., nature, churches; Mahoney et al., *in press*). A violation of these sacred aspects is considered a desecration.

Many people strive to build, foster, maintain, and transform their relationship with the sacred. Perceptions that the sacred has been threatened or violated may elicit particularly strong emotional reactions (Mahoney et al., *in press*). In this vein, community residents who had experienced a major life event in the past two years and appraised that event to be a desecration reported higher levels of state anger and avoidant thoughts about their stressor (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). In a study of college students in New York City and Ohio following the attacks on September 11, individuals who viewed the attacks as a desecration, or violation of their sacred values, endorsed more extreme responses to the attacks such as the use of nuclear and biological weapons (Mahoney et al., 2002). When faced with threats of such a profound nature, individuals are likely to engage in coping strategies to preserve and protect their sacred values and objects. For example, couples who view their marriage as sacred employ more constructive problem-solving activities to address conflicts (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). Similarly, college students who view their bodies as sacred reported higher levels of health-promoting behaviors, greater body satisfaction, and more disapproval of drug use after controlling for race, gender, and general religiousness (Mahoney et al., 2005).

The concept of desecration is similar to symbolic group threats within intergroup threat theory. Symbolic group threats are defined as “threats to a group’s religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or worldview” (Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009, p. 44). In other words, symbolic group threats are desecrations that occur in an intergroup context,

such as between Christian and LG communities. These threats undermine an individual's self-identity and are hypothesized to be associated with dehumanization of and reduced empathy for the outgroup, greater conformity to the ingroup's beliefs, and "vicious behavioral responses" (Stephan et al., 2009, p. 53). This theory is consistent with the research findings noted above demonstrating the strong reactions associated with desecrations.

Religious coping theory provides a helpful framework for understanding prejudice for various reasons. First, religious coping theory assumes that individuals proactively search for meaning, evaluate situations in the context of what they view as significant, and cope in order to preserve and protect those significant values. Within this framework, anti-LG attitudes can be understood as a reaction of Christians to the view that LG individuals threaten sacred values. These attitudes may be one way to cope with this perceived threat. Second, religious coping theory takes a broader perspective by focusing on individual *and* situational variables. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religiousness and anti-LG attitudes by looking beyond dispositional factors to consider factors such as the social context. Third, religious coping theory assumes a dynamic perspective in which psychological processes are fluid. An individual's evaluation of a situation, coping methods, and relevant outcomes interact and change over time. Therefore, anti-LG attitudes are not considered static, but may change as perceptions of the threat and coping methods change. Generally, religious coping theory attempts to understand prejudice by considering the dynamic interaction between the individual, life events, and the social context rather than through attention to general beliefs and static traits.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF LG SEXUALITY AS A DESECRATION OF CHRISTIAN VALUES

According to social identity theory, one mechanism through which social groups are defined is by the values of the respective groups. Similarity of values within the ingroup and differences from the outgroup are emphasized in order to protect the values of the ingroup and maintain group distinctions (Tajfel, 1982). Values, therefore, are an important component of group identity. LG sexuality is often considered to be in direct conflict with the values of many Christian traditions and is often described as unnatural or a sin (Rodriguez, 2010). For example, the Catholic Church teaches that God created sexual intercourse to be procreative and any nonprocreative sexual act (e.g., masturbation, LG sex) is not approved by the Church (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997; West, 2004). Moreover, in a review of research on LG Christians, Rodriguez (2010) identifies specific biblical passages that are often cited to support the view of homosexuality as a sin.

Research also indicates that LG sexuality is viewed as a violation of sacred religious beliefs and values (i.e., a desecration) about the institution of marriage and family (Burdette et al., 2005; Macgillivray, 2008). Data from the 1988 General Social Survey indicate that LG individuals are viewed as a contamination of society (Burdette et al., 2005). In a series of two studies, Canadian college freshmen listed which of their values or traditions were blocked or facilitated by LG individuals. Participants indicated that LG individuals block their attainment of family and their attainment of religion and promote attainment of freedom and peace (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993).

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE LINK BETWEEN DESECRATION AND ANTI-LG ATTITUDES

Researchers have not yet directly examined the link between desecration and anti-LG attitudes. However, the link between desecration and prejudicial attitudes has been demonstrated with other target groups. For example, one study examined the relationship between the view that Jews desecrate Christian values and anti-Semitism (Pargament et al., 2007). A sample of 139 college students completed measures of perceptions of Jews as desecrators of Christianity and anti-Semitism. Results indicated that greater desecration was associated with greater anti-Semitism after controlling for demographic and personological variables. In a study of anti-Muslim attitudes, 192 college students completed measures of the perception of Muslims as desecrators of Christianity and anti-Muslim attitudes (Abu Raiya et al., 2008). Similar results emerged in that the appraisal of Muslims as desecrators of Christianity predicted higher levels of anti-Muslim attitudes after controlling for demographic and personality variables. Taken together, these findings support the importance of desecration to understanding prejudice toward a religious outgroup (e.g., Jews and Muslims).

In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that perceiving LG sexuality as a threat is associated with anti-LG attitudes. For example, the perception that LG individuals block the attainment of values, customs, and traditions predicts higher levels of anti-LG attitudes (Haddock et al., 1993). Greater perceived dissimilarity in values from LG individuals was also associated with more negative attitudes. In addition, the 1988 General Social Survey results indicate that the belief that LG individuals contaminate society is associated with greater intolerance of LG individuals (Burdette et al., 2005).

The perception that LG individuals violate values has also been associated with attitudes regarding helping LG individuals. In a study conducted by Jackson and Esses (1997), undergraduate Canadian students read a paragraph describing the problem of heightened unemployment for one of two



target groups, native Canadians or LG individuals. They were then asked to rate the degree to which the target group was responsible for their unemployment rate and the best solution to the unemployment. Results indicated that greater religious fundamentalism was associated with perceptions that LG individuals threaten important values. In addition, participants scoring high in religious fundamentalism attributed responsibility for the problem to LG individuals, but not to Canadians. They also indicated that LG individuals, but not native Canadians, should be responsible for solving the problem rather than receiving help. Finally, the belief that LG individuals threaten important values fully mediated the positive relationship between fundamentalism and attributions of responsibility, suggesting that attributions of responsibility were due to this perception of threat.

### RELIGIOUS COPING WITH PERCEPTIONS OF LG INDIVIDUALS AS THREATS TO CHRISTIANITY

From the framework of religious coping theory, the way an individual responds (i.e., prejudicial attitudes) to a stressor (i.e., desecration) depends on the individual's method of religious coping. There are a variety of religious coping strategies which can be categorized as positive or negative (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Positive religious coping strategies are imbued with a sense of spirituality, love, compassion, collaboration, and partnership with the divine. Reappraising a stressor as beneficial from a religious perspective and drawing support from the divine or religious scriptures to cope with a stressor are examples of positive religious coping strategies. On the other hand, negative religious coping strategies are marked with strain and struggle and reflect an ominous view of the world. Coping with a stressor through anger at God and believing that the devil caused the stressor to occur are examples of negative religious coping strategies.

Previous research indicates that positive and negative religious coping strategies differentially predict outcomes (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament et al., 1998). Positive religious coping tends to be associated with positive psychological outcomes while negative religious coping is associated with negative psychological outcomes. Of particular relevance to this study is Pargament and colleagues' (2007) study investigating anti-Semitic beliefs and desecration in which negative coping strategies (i.e., demonic and punishing God appraisals) were predictive of greater conflict with Jews and greater anti-Semitism. On the other hand, positive religious coping strategies, including coping through Christian love, were related to less conflict with Jews and lower anti-Semitism. Similarly, in the previously cited study of anti-Muslim attitudes, coping with the perception that Muslims desecrated Christianity by using demonic and punishing God appraisals was

related to increased anti-Muslim attitudes, while coping through Christian love and learning from Islamic spirituality were predictive of less conflict with Muslims (Abu Raiya et. al, 2008).

## PREDICTORS OF PERCEPTIONS OF DESECRATION

Research on anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim attitudes has identified personological, religious, and social variables that predict perceptions that these religious groups desecrate Christianity. Specifically, right-wing authoritarianism, religious orthodoxy, and exposure to desecration messages were found to predict greater endorsement that Jews and Muslims desecrate Christianity (Pargament et al., 2007; Abu Riaya et al., 2008, respectively). Religious fundamentalism and religious particularism were also predictive of greater endorsement that Muslims desecrate Christianity. On the other hand, greater contact with Jews and exposure to counterdesecration messages predicted lower levels of perceived desecration by Jews. Religious pluralism predicted lower levels of perceived desecration by Muslims. Research based on intergroup threat theory has also found that greater identification with the ingroup, higher right-wing authoritarianism, and less contact with the outgroup are associated with greater perceived threat (Stephan et al., 2009). Although LG individuals are not a religious denomination, we predict that these variables will also be significant predictors of desecration by LG individuals.

## PRESENT STUDY

In the current study, we aim to better understand prejudice against LG individuals from a religious coping perspective. Specifically, we are investigating whether viewing LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity is predictive of anti-LG attitudes. Religious coping theory has been used to explain anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim attitudes as reactions to perceptions of desecration by these groups (Pargament et al., 2007; Abu Riaya et al., 2008, respectively). It is reasonable to assume that this same paradigm can be applied to anti-LG attitudes. Specifically, this study examines the following hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that higher levels of perceived desecration (stressor) will predict greater prejudice (response) after controlling for personological variables and general religiousness. Second, we hypothesize that positive and negative religious coping with perceived desecration will be associated with lower and higher prejudicial views, respectively. Third, we hypothesize that personological variables, exposure to LG individuals, and exposure to messages of desecration will predict perceptions of LG individuals as desecrators of Christian beliefs.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 328$ ) ranged in age from 18 to 24 years ( $M = 19.06$ ,  $SD = .95$ ) and were 42.4% male. Regarding sexual orientation, 95.1% identified as heterosexual, 1.8% as gay or lesbian, 1.2% bisexual, and 1.8% endorsed "don't know or not sure." Participants were also asked the sex of individuals with whom they had sexual contact. 12.8% reported never having had sexual contact. 4.0% reported having sexual contact with only individuals of the same gender and 75.9% reported having sexual contact with only individuals of the opposite gender. 6.7% reported having sexual contact with both genders.

The sample was primarily Christian (82%) with 36.3% of participants identifying as Catholic, 26.2% as Protestant, and 19.5% as nondenominational Christian. In addition, 1.2% of participants identified as Muslim, .9% as Jewish, 11.0% indicated no religious affiliation, and 4.6% endorsed "other." Across measures, participants reported moderate levels of religious activity and beliefs. Participants rated the frequency with which they attend religious services on a scale of 1 to 9, with a higher rating indicating more frequent attendance. The mean for attendance at religious services was 4.88 ( $SD = 2.26$ ). More specifically, 27.2% of participants reported attending religious services "nearly every week" or more, and 26.6% reported attending services "about once per month" to "2-3 times per month." Twenty-nine percent reported attending services "less than once per year" to "about once or twice a year" and 17% reported attending "several times a year" or less.

Frequency of private prayer was measured on a scale of 1 to 8 with higher numbers indicating more engagement in prayer. The mean for this religious activity was 4.86 ( $SD = 2.41$ ). Thirty-one percent reported engaging in private prayer "once a day" or more. In addition, 37.5% reported praying privately "a few times a month" to "a few times a week" whereas 26.2% reported praying "less than once a month." Finally, participants rated the degree to which they considered themselves religious on a scale from 1 to 4, with higher numbers indicating a greater degree of religiosity. The mean on this self-rated religiosity item was 2.54 ( $SD = .88$ ). Almost half of the sample (43.3%) endorsed "moderately religious," whereas 30.5% endorsed "slightly religious." Only 25.6% of the sample endorsed either "very religious" or "not religious at all," evidence of the moderate religiosity of the sample.

### Procedures

An online recruiting system was used to advertise this study to students enrolled in psychology classes at a Midwestern university. A brief description of the study was posted on the Web site. Students who completed the study received extra credit in their psychology classes.

The study consisted of a Web-based survey that took approximately one hour to complete. Consent was indicated by completion and submission of the survey. Participants' responses were confidential and anonymous. All procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board. Data was collected in 2005–2006.

## Measures

### DESECRATION

Two scales, Exposure to Desecration and Agreement with Desecration, were used to measure desecration. These scales were adapted from a study assessing desecration as a predictor of anti-Semitism (Pargament et al., 2007). The original 12-item scales were modified to assess perceptions that LG sexuality is a desecration of Christianity and Christian morals. For the Exposure to Desecration scale, participants rated the frequency of exposure to messages that LG individuals violate Christian values (e.g., "The failure of homosexuals to accept the Church's teaching on sexual morality is an insult to Christianity"). Reliability analyses indicated that the internal consistency of the scale improved with the elimination of two items (12-item:  $\alpha = .77$ ; 10-item:  $\alpha = .88$ ). Therefore, the final scale consisted of 10 items and each item was rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*often*). Higher scores indicated greater exposure to desecration messages.

To maintain consistency across the desecration scales, the same 10 items were used for the Agreement with Desecration scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ). However, for this scale, participants rated their degree of agreement with each item using a 5-point scale. Higher scores were indicative of greater agreement with desecration messages.

### ALTERNATIVE PREDICTORS OF ANTI-LG ATTITUDES

The study also assessed for personological variables that have been predictive of anti-LG prejudice and religious-related prejudice in general. These variables include Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Religious Pluralism, Doctrinal Orthodoxy, Religious Fundamentalism, and Closeness to the LG Community.

The Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (Altemeyer, 1981) is a 34-item scale that assesses agreement with traditionally conservative political beliefs such as, "Life imprisonment is justified for certain crimes." Two items from the original scale that referred directly to beliefs regarding homosexuality were dropped to avoid confounding other measures used in this study. Each item was rated on a 9-point scale from *very strongly disagree* (-4) to *very strongly agree* (4). Higher scores indicate greater agreement with conservative political beliefs. This scale demonstrated good reliability with the current sample ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

The Doctrinal Orthodoxy scale (Batson, 1976) was used to measure belief in the teachings and doctrines of Christianity. Participants rated each of 12 items on a 9-point scale, ranging from *very strongly disagree* (-4) to *very strongly agree* (4). Higher scores on this scale indicate greater agreement with Christian doctrinal teachings. In the current sample, the internal consistency for this scale was adequate ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

The Religious Fundamentalism scale assesses the degree to which participants believe that there is one true religion. Based on the anti-Semitism study conducted by Pargament and colleagues (2007), a 14-item version of the scale was used. Participants indicated agreement with each item on a 9-point scale, ranging from *very strongly disagree* (-4) to *very strongly agree* (4). Higher scores indicate greater belief in one true religion. For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .91.

The Religious Pluralism scale was used to assess participants' beliefs in the existence of multiple paths to religious truth (Pargament et al., 2007). On this 7-item scale, participants indicate their agreement with statements such as "There are many paths to God" using a 5-point scale, ranging from *highly disagree* to *highly agree*. Higher scores indicate greater belief in religious pluralism. Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .85.

Last, a 3-item Closeness to the LG Community scale was created to assess participants' familiarity with lesbian and gay individuals. This scale was patterned after the Closeness to Jews scale used in Pargament and colleague's (2007) anti-Semitism study. This scale assesses the degree to which participants are familiar with the LG lifestyle, the number of LG individuals they are acquainted with, and the number of LG friends they have. This scale demonstrated good internal reliability on the current sample ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

#### ANTI-LG ATTITUDES

Prejudice toward LG individuals can take many forms; therefore, it is important to assess this as a multi-dimensional construct. This study focused on four attitudes toward LG individuals: hostility, civil rights, morality, and perceived conflict.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale for Homosexuals (LGB-KASH; Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Schutte, 2005) was used to assess hostile feelings toward LG individuals and support for granting civil rights to LG individuals. The LGB-KASH has five subscales; however, only the Hostility and Civil Rights subscales were used in the current study. For these subscales, participants rate how much each statement was "characteristic of you and/or your views" on a 7-point scale ranging from *very uncharacteristic* to *very characteristic*. The 6-item hostility subscale assesses

views such as “Homosexuals deserve the hatred they receive.” Higher scores on this subscale indicate greater hostility toward LG individuals. The 5-item civil rights subscale assesses beliefs such as “I think marriage should be legal for same-sex couples,” with higher scores representing greater support for granting civil rights to LG individuals. Both subscales demonstrated adequate internal consistency with this sample (Hostility:  $\alpha = .85$  and Civil Rights:  $\alpha = .89$ ).

To assess perceptions of behavioral engagement in a LG lifestyle as immoral, we created a 5-item measure of immorality. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as “One must admit, the homosexual lifestyle is immoral” on a 9-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (9), with higher scores representing greater belief that engaging in a LG lifestyle is immoral. This scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .86.

Finally, we assessed the degree to which participants perceived conflict between Christians and LG individuals. This 5-item scale was modified from the study of desecration and anti-Semitism (Pargament et al., 2007). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with items such as “The everyday interest of homosexuals and Christians conflict,” on a scale from *not at all true* (1) to *very true* (5). Higher scores indicate more perceived conflict between the two groups. This scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency in the current sample ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

#### RELIGIOUS COPING WITH DESECRATION

The items for the religious coping scale were adapted from the RCOPE scale, a measure of religious coping strategies (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000; Pargament et al., 1998) and from a study investigating anti-Semitism and desecration (Pargament et al., 2007). Previous research indicates that the RCOPE consists of two subscales. Therefore, a principal components factor analysis with a Direct Oblimin rotation extracting two fixed factors was applied to the adapted RCOPE items. Twenty-seven items loaded onto factor 1 (eigenvalue = 15.83; variance explained = 37.68%) and 14 items loaded onto factor 2 (eigenvalue = 4.83; variance explained = 11.49%). One item was excluded as it did not load onto either factor. Items that loaded onto Factor 1 were consistent with negative religious coping such as “I understand that homosexuals are doing the work of the Devil.” Items on Factor 2 were consistent with positive religious coping including “I remind myself that homosexuals are as much a part of God’s plan as other groups.” Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the items on a 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all/not applicable* to *strongly agree*. Higher scores indicate greater use of religious coping techniques. Both subscales exhibited good internal consistency (negative religious coping:  $\alpha = .97$ ; positive religious coping:  $\alpha = .83$ ).

## RESULTS

## Perception of LG Individuals as Desecrators of Christianity

To gain an understanding of the commonality of messages that LG individuals desecrate Christianity, we examined item frequencies for the exposure to and agreement with desecration messages scales (see Table 1). First, 77% of participants reported being exposed to at least one desecration item *occasionally* (4) to *often* (5), indicating that the majority of participants had been exposed to the idea that LG individuals desecrate Christianity. The percentage of participants who reported being exposed to each desecration message *occasionally* to *often* ranged widely from 13.9% (“Among themselves, homosexuals think Christians are ignorant for believing in the church’s teaching on sexual morality”) to 68% (“Homosexual relationships violate the nature and purpose of marriage as defined by God”). The two items to which over half of the sample reported exposure *occasionally* to *often* focused on the relationship between homosexual relationships and marriage.

Regarding agreement with desecration, 66% of participants reported *mild* (2) to *strong* (5) agreement with at least one desecration item, indicating that the majority of participants endorse some degree of perception of violation of Christian values. The percentage of participants who reported agreeing with desecration messages *mildly* to *strongly* ranged from 13.5%

**TABLE 1** Response Frequencies for Exposure to and Agreement with Desecration Items

Desecration item	% Exposed occasionally to often	% Agree mildly to strongly
Homosexuals have declared war on Christian morals.	18.7	14.3
Some homosexuals have greatly damaged the church.	23.8	17.7
The failure of homosexuals to accept the Church’s teaching on sexual morality is an insult to Christianity.	23.9	20.0
Homosexual relationships violate the nature and purpose of marriage as defined by God.	68.0	42.2
Homosexuals do not respect Christianity.	28.3	17.8
Homosexuals represent a threat to the ultimate mission of Christ.	16.4	13.5
Homosexuals oppose the fundamental teachings of Christ.	26.6	25.8
Homosexuals are a threat to marriage as defined by the Church.	59.5	32.2
Among themselves, homosexuals think Christians are ignorant for believing in the Churches teaching on sexual morality.	13.9	16.3
Homosexuals believe the Church’s teaching on sexual morality is in error.	14.7	22.4

(“Homosexuals represent a threat to the ultimate mission of Christ”) to 42.2% (“Homosexual relationships violate the nature and purpose of marriage as defined by God”). For 8 of the 10 items, a greater proportion of participants reported being exposed to the desecration message than the proportion who agreed with the same message. Exceptions to this pattern include two items: “Among themselves, homosexuals think Christians are ignorant for believing in the Churches teaching on sexual morality” and “Homosexuals believe the Church’s teaching on sexual morality is in error.” For these items, a greater proportion of the sample reported agreeing with the statement than being exposed to it.

### Perception of LG Desecration and LG Prejudice

Second, this study examined the relationship between perceptions of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity and anti-LG attitudes. Table 2 contains descriptive statistics for all measures, and Table 3 contains correlations of the predictor variables with criterion variables (Morality, Hostility, Civil Rights, and Conflict). Generally, higher scores on Fundamentalism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and Orthodoxy were associated with higher scores on the Morality, Hostility, and Conflict scales and with lower scores

**TABLE 2** Descriptive Statistics for All Measures

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Pluralism	325	1.00	5.00	3.37	.93
Right-Wing Authoritarianism	328	1.41	7.56	4.61	1.05
Closeness to LG Community	313	1.00	5.00	2.55	.89
Fundamentalism	328	1.00	8.93	4.85	1.62
Orthodoxy	328	1.15	9.00	6.86	2.18
Positive Religious Coping	328	1.00	4.79	2.62	.79
Negative Religious Coping	328	1.00	4.52	1.57	.78
Exposure to Desecration	328	1.00	5.00	2.59	.90
Agreement with Desecration	328	1.00	5.00	2.42	.91

**TABLE 3** Correlations of Predictors with Morality, Hostility, Civil Rights, and Conflict

Predictors	Morality	Hostility	Civil Rights	Conflict
Exposure to Desecration	.012	.032	.039	.063
Agreement with Desecration	.662*	.474*	-.569*	.561*
Pluralism	-.276*	-.194*	.300*	-.263*
Right-Wing Authoritarianism	.545*	.368*	-.545*	.386*
Closeness to LG Comm.	-.281*	-.419*	.439*	-.267*
Fundamentalism	.614*	.254*	-.534*	.408*
Orthodoxy	.457*	.103	-.218*	.180*

\**p* < .01.



on the Civil Rights scale. In addition, higher scores on Closeness to LG Community and Pluralism were associated with lower scores on the Morality, Hostility, and Conflict scales and with higher scores on the Civil Rights scale. The Exposure to Desecration scale was not significantly correlated with the criterion variables. However, Agreement with Desecration was positively correlated with Morality ( $r = .66, p < .01$ ), Hostility ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ), and Conflict ( $r = .56, p < .01$ ) and negatively correlated with Civil Rights ( $r = -.57, p < .01$ ). These results indicate that viewing LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity is associated with more prejudicial attitudes toward these individuals. However, personological variables are also significantly correlated with anti-LG attitudes.

### Perception of LG Desecration as a Distinct Predictor of LG Prejudice

The next question examined by this study is whether the perception of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity predicts anti-LG attitudes. Regression analyses were conducted on three models with the Morality, Hostility, Civil Rights, and Conflict scales as criterion variables. In Model 1, the predictors were the demographic variables (age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, prayer, and self-rated religiosity). The overall model was a significant predictor of all criterion variables. In Model 2, the competing variables (Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, and Orthodoxy) were added to the predictors of Model 1. The overall model and the change in  $R^2$  from Model 1 to Model 2 were significant for all criterion variables.

For Model 3, Exposure to Desecration and Agreement with Desecration were added to the predictors of Model 2. For Morality, the overall model ( $R^2 = .57, p < .001$ ) and the change in  $R^2$  from Model 2 to Model 3 were significant ( $R^2\text{change} = .09, p < .001$ ). Significant predictors of Morality included ethnicity, Fundamentalism, Orthodoxy, and Agreement with Desecration ( $\beta = .41, p < .001$ ; Table 4).

For Hostility, the overall model ( $R^2 = .32, p < .001$ ) and the change in  $R^2$  from Model 2 to Model 3 ( $R^2\text{change} = .07, p < .001$ ) were also significant. Gender, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, and Agreement with Desecration ( $\beta = .33, p < .001$ ) significantly predicted Hostility (Table 4).

For Civil Rights, Model 3 ( $R^2 = .49, p < .001$ ) and the change in  $R^2$  from Model 2 to Model 3 ( $R^2\text{change} = .04, p < .001$ ) were significant. Significant predictors of Civil Rights included Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, and Agreement with Desecration ( $\beta = -.26, p < .001$ ; Table 5).

Finally, for Conflict, Model 3 ( $R^2 = .34, p < .001$ ) and the change in  $R^2$  from Model 2 to Model 3 ( $R^2\text{change} = .12, p < .001$ ) were significant. Frequency of prayer and Agreement with Desecration ( $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ) significantly predicted Conflict (Table 5). Collectively, these results suggest

**TABLE 4** Predictors of Morality and Hostility

Predictors	Morality ( $\beta$ )			Hostility ( $\beta$ )		
	Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	Model 2 <sup>b</sup>	Model 3 <sup>c</sup>	Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	Model 2 <sup>b</sup>	Model 3 <sup>c</sup>
Demographics						
Age	.09 <sup>†</sup>	.04	.04	.06	.02	.009
Ethnicity <sup>d</sup>	-.14**	-.11*	-.11**	-.02	-.05	-.05
Gender <sup>e</sup>	-.18***	-.06	-.03	-.28***	-.14*	-.11*
Religious Preference <sup>f</sup>	-.22***	-.07	-.07	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	-.03	-.04
Church Attendance	.24**	.05	-.01	.23**	.12	.07
Prayer	.14 <sup>†</sup>	.02	-.01	-.06	-.06	-.07
Self-Rated Religiosity	-.01	-.11	-.05	-.08	-.04	-.00
Competing Variables						
Pluralism		-.09	-.06		-.08	-.05
Right-Wing Authoritarianism		.12 <sup>†</sup>	.08		.29***	.25**
Closeness to LG Comm		-.15***	-.07		-.31***	-.26***
Fundamentalism		.32***	.16*		-.11	-.21*
Orthodoxy		.25***	.22***		.03	-.02
Exposure to Desecration			-.10*			.03
Agreement w/ Desecration			.41***			.33***
Overall R <sup>2</sup>	.28***	.48***	.57***	.10***	.25***	.32***
Change R <sup>2</sup>		.21***	.09***		.16***	.07***

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity.

<sup>b</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity, Pluralism, right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, Doctrinal Orthodoxy.

<sup>c</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity, Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, Doctrinal Orthodoxy, Exposure to Desecration, Agreement with Desecration.

<sup>d</sup>Ethnicity: 0 = other, 1 = Caucasian.

<sup>e</sup>Gender: 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

<sup>f</sup>Religious Preference: 1 = Christian, 2 = Other.

that, after controlling for demographic and personal variables, agreeing that LG individuals desecrate Christianity significantly predicted more negative attitudes toward LG individuals.

### Religious Coping with Desecration as Predictors of LG Prejudice

This study also examined whether religious coping with perceptions of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity is associated with prejudice against these individuals. Regression analyses were conducted with two models with the Morality, Hostility, Civil Rights, and Conflict scales as criterion variables. In Model 1, the predictors were the demographic variables (age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, prayer,

**TABLE 5** Predictors of Civil Rights and Conflict

Predictors	Civil Rights ( $\beta$ )			Conflict ( $\beta$ )		
	Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	Model 2 <sup>b</sup>	Model 3 <sup>c</sup>	Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	Model 2 <sup>b</sup>	Model 3 <sup>c</sup>
Demographics						
Age	-.09	-.06	-.06	-.03	-.06	-.07
Ethnicity <sup>d</sup>	.042	.03	.03	-.03	-.01	-.01
Gender <sup>e</sup>	.27***	.09†	.07	-.14*	-.03	.02
Religious Preference <sup>f</sup>	.12†	.01	.01	-.14†	-.06	-.07
Church Attendance	-.25**	-.01	.03	.27***	.10	.02
Prayer	-.04	.02	.05	-.09	-.14†	-.17*
Self-Rated Religiosity	.07	.09	.05	-.04	-.07	-.01
Competing Variables						
Pluralism		.01	-.01		-.09	-.06
Right-Wing Authoritarianism		-.28***	-.24***		.14†	.09
Closeness to LG Comm.		.28***	.23***		-.16**	-.08
Fundamentalism		-.36***	-.27***		.28**	.12
Orthodoxy		.06	.08		.002	-.04
Exposure to Desecration			.07			-.01
Agreement w/ Desecration			-.26***			.45***
Overall $R^2$	.14***	.46***	.49***	.07***	.22***	.34***
Change $R^2$		.32***	.04***		.16***	.12***

† $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity.

<sup>b</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity, Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, Doctrinal Orthodoxy.

<sup>c</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity, Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, Doctrinal Orthodoxy, Exposure to Desecration, Agreement with Desecration.

<sup>d</sup>Ethnicity: 0 = other, 1 = Caucasian.

<sup>e</sup>Gender: 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

<sup>f</sup>Religious Preference: 1 = Christian, 2 = Other.

and self-rated religiosity) and the competing variables (Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, and Orthodoxy). In Model 2, positive and negative religious coping were added to the predictors of Model 1. Model 1 was significant for Morality ( $R^2 = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Hostility ( $R^2 = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Civil Rights ( $R^2 = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Conflict ( $R^2 = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Model 2 was also significant for all criterion variables and the change in  $R^2$  from Model 1 to Model 2 was significant for Morality ( $R^2 = .49$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2$ change = .01,  $p < .05$ ), Hostility ( $R^2 = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2$ change = .22,  $p < .001$ ), Civil Rights ( $R^2 = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2$ change = .06,  $p < .0001$ ), and Conflict ( $R^2 = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2$ change = .13,  $p < .001$ ). Negative religious coping predicted higher levels of Morality ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Hostility

( $\beta = .59, p < .001$ ), and Conflict ( $\beta = .43, p < .001$ ) and lower levels of Civil Rights ( $\beta = -.14, p < .01$ ). Positive religious coping predicted lower levels of Hostility ( $\beta = -.15, p < .01$ ) and Conflict ( $\beta = -.22, p < .001$ ) and higher levels of Civil Rights ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ).

Predictors of Agreement with Desecration

Based on the relationship between agreement that LG individuals desecrate Christianity and anti-LG attitudes, this study examined predictors of agreement with desecration. Regression analyses were conducted with Agreement with Desecration as the criterion variables (Table 6). In Model 1, the predictors included demographic variables (age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, prayer, and self-rated religiosity) and competing variables (Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, and Orthodoxy). The overall model significantly predicted Agreement with Desecration ( $R^2 = .39, p < .001$ ). In Model

**TABLE 6** Predictors of Agreement with Desecration

Predictors	Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	Model 2 <sup>b</sup>
Demographics		
Age	.02	.001
Ethnicity <sup>c</sup>	.00	.01
Gender <sup>d</sup>	-.09 <sup>†</sup>	-.10*
Religious Preference <sup>e</sup>	.02	.01
Church Attendance	.17*	.16*
Prayer	.05	.09
Self-Rated Religiosity	-.13 <sup>†</sup>	-.15*
Competing Variables		
Pluralism	-.06	-.06
Right-Wing Authoritarianism	.12 <sup>†</sup>	.12 <sup>†</sup>
Closeness to LG Community	-.16**	-.20***
Fundamentalism	.34***	.35***
Orthodoxy	.09	.06
Exposure to Desecration		
Overall $R^2$	.39***	.44***
Change $R^2$		.05***

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity, Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, Doctrinal Orthodoxy.

<sup>b</sup>Predictors: Age, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, church attendance, private prayer, self-rated religiosity, Pluralism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Closeness to LG Community, Fundamentalism, Doctrinal Orthodoxy, Exposure to Desecration.

<sup>c</sup>Ethnicity: 0 = other, 1 = Caucasian.

<sup>d</sup>Gender: 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

<sup>e</sup>Religious Preference: 1 = Christian, 2 = other.

2, Exposure to Desecration was added to the predictors of Model 1. The overall model significantly predicted Agreement with Desecration ( $R^2 = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, the change in  $R^2$  from Model 1 to Model 2 was significant for Agreement with Desecration ( $R^2\text{change} = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Significant predictors included gender ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ), church attendance ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ), self-rated religiosity ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ), closeness to LG community ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and fundamentalism ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Exposure to Desecration also significantly predicted Agreement with Desecration ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to use a religious coping framework to understand prejudice toward LG individuals. Specifically, we hypothesized that viewing LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity (the stressor) would predict greater prejudice (the response) and that use of positive and negative religious coping with the perceived desecration would be associated with lower and higher levels of prejudice, respectively. The results were largely consistent with our hypotheses. Our findings suggest that anti-LG attitudes can be understood as a reaction to the perception that LG individuals threaten sacred values. In addition, the way in which individuals cope with these perceptions is related to their attitudes toward LG individuals.

This study is consistent with previous research on anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim attitudes (Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Pargament et al., 2007). Taken together, these three studies strongly suggest that perceived threats from outgroups against sacred values of the ingroup can elicit prejudice in the ingroup. In addition, they support the application of a religious coping framework to anti-LG attitudes (Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Pargament, 1997; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; Pargament et al., 2007) while also fitting within the context of existing social psychology theories such as identity and intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al., 2009).

Several noteworthy findings emerged. First, this study demonstrates that perceptions of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity are relatively common. Over three quarters (77%) of the sample reported exposure to at least one desecration item and more than half (66%) of participants endorsed agreement with at least one desecration item. These findings suggest that messages of desecration are relatively ubiquitous and that agreement with these messages is not uncommon. The relatively high levels of exposure to messages regarding homosexual relationships and marriage is notable and may reflect the recent focus on legalization of gay marriage in the United States.

In addition, the proportion of participants who endorsed some level of agreement with items assessing perceptions of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity (14–42%) was higher than in the studies on anti-Semitism (7–17%; Pargament et al., 2007) and anti-Muslim attitudes (13–28%; Abu Raiya et al., 2008). These findings suggest that LG individuals may be more commonly viewed as desecrators of Christianity than Jews or Muslims. In the absence of empirical replication of this finding in a single sample or a clear theoretical explanation, the differences in results across studies should be interpreted with caution. Yet, these proportions are particularly noteworthy given that the sample was composed of college students who may be more educated and less religious than the general population. Even higher percentages may emerge in a sample with less education and higher levels of religiosity.

Second, participants who viewed LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity reported higher levels of anti-LG attitudes. This finding emerged for each aspect of prejudice examined and remained significant after controlling for demographic variables and established personological predictors of prejudice. Specifically, viewing LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity explained 4% (civil rights) to 12% (perceived conflict) of the unique variance in anti-LG attitudes after controlling for demographic and personological variables. Taken together, the demographic, personological, and desecration variables accounted for 34% (perceived conflict) to 57% (morality) of the variance in prejudice. In addition, agreement with desecration was the strongest predictor for all aspects of prejudice except civil rights. It is important to note that exposure to desecration messages was only a significant predictor of one aspect of prejudice (morality), suggesting that internalization of the view of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity is more relevant to our understanding of prejudice than mere exposure to desecration messages.

Third, this study indicates that the way in which individuals cope with perceived desecration is related to prejudice. Specifically, positive religious coping or responses indicative of love and compassion was associated with less hostility and perceived conflict and with the belief that LG individuals deserve greater civil rights. However, positive religious coping was not associated with views of LG individuals as immoral. This finding may suggest that anti-LG attitudes are multi-factorial and that these factors have unique relationships with positive religious coping. Additional research is needed to understand the distinct mechanisms underlying the relationship between positive religious coping and components of anti-LG attitudes.

On the other hand, negative religious coping predicted higher levels of hostility, perceived conflict, and immorality and the belief that LG individuals do not deserve greater civil rights. These results were significant after controlling for demographic and personological variables, suggesting that the ways individuals cope with perceptions of desecration can influence

attitudes toward the desecrators. The correlational nature of these analyses makes interpretation difficult. Positive religious coping with perceptions of desecration may lead to reductions in prejudice while negative religious coping may lead to negative attitudes. In this case, modifying the coping techniques used to deal with desecration may impact prejudice toward LG individuals. However, the opposite causal relationship may also be true. Individuals who are less prejudiced toward LG individuals may be more likely to use positive religious coping in the context of desecration while individuals with negative attitudes toward LG individuals may be more likely to use negative religious coping techniques.

Fourth, this study also identifies predictors of perceived desecration. Notably, greater exposure to messages of desecration from church, family, and media is associated with greater agreement with perceptions of desecration. Exposure to desecration was the second strongest predictor of agreement with desecration after religious fundamentalism and explained 5% of the unique variance in agreement with desecration after controlling for demographic and personological variables. Thus, although exposure to desecration messages does not predict anti-LG attitudes, it does predict greater perception of LG individuals as desecrators of Christianity. The correlational nature of this study precludes causal inferences regarding the relationship between these variables. However, this result demonstrates the potential power of social messages to create the context for prejudicial attitudes.

### Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study is the third in a series applying a religious coping framework to prejudice across various groups with consistent results across studies (Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Pargament et al., 2007). The consistency of these results suggests that the religious coping framework and the concept of desecration are applicable to our understanding of prejudice across target groups. Notably, the first two studies applying religious coping theory to prejudice focused on negative attitudes toward other religious groups. In this study, the framework was applied to perceptions of a group not affiliated with a particular religious tradition, suggesting that a religious coping framework for understanding prejudice is not specific to relationships between various religious denominations. The common factor may be that the outgroup is viewed as a threat to sacred values.

This study has several practical implications for the prevention and mitigation of anti-LG attitudes. First, these results suggest that the information individuals are exposed to about LG individuals impacts their attitudes. This information can come from messages about LG individuals (e.g., messages of desecration) and from contact with LG individuals (e.g., learning from

LG individuals). Identity process theory maintains that changes in identity are normative in the context of changes in social structure and influences (Breakwell, 2004). The current study suggests that changes in exposure to messages of desecration in social contexts may impact individuals' views of themselves in relation to LG individuals. Therefore, religious communities may be able to reduce anti-LG attitudes through counterdesecration messages and promotion of positive religious coping responses to perceived desecrations.

In addition, research indicates that personal contact with LG individuals is associated with more positive attitudes (see Maher et al., 2009, for a review). Creating opportunities for religious and LG communities to interact with and learn from each other may reduce prejudicial attitudes. These interactions may also promote increased awareness of sacred values and greater insight into group reactions to perceived desecrations. Such mutual understanding may create increased intergroup empathy and promote forgiveness for hostile responses and conflict across groups.

Third, the results of this study suggest that interventions to reduce anti-LG attitudes should consider the sacred beliefs of religious communities (Hooghe, Claes, Harell, Quintelier, & Dejaeghere, 2010). Interventions that fail to consider sacred beliefs or require that individuals abandon those beliefs may be viewed as an additional desecration, exacerbating negative attitudes. For example, a one-hour intervention designed to reduce negative attitudes toward homosexual individuals in students at a Christian college incorporated scripture passages describing Jesus's love for diverse peoples. The intervention significantly improved positive attitudes toward homosexual individuals and behavior in students who, at baseline, rejected both (Bassett et al., 2005). This finding suggests that incorporating sacred values into interventions may improve the impact of those interventions on prejudicial attitudes.

Similarly, public policy addressing negative attitudes and behaviors toward LG individuals may benefit from consideration of sacred religious beliefs. Policymakers may gain from consulting with religious communities to develop policies and programs that do not violate sacred values. Inclusion of religious communities on committees, pilot programs, and research projects will facilitate consideration of their values (Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007). Policies that respect sacred values will likely gain more support from religious communities, increasing their overall effectiveness.

The following limitations are relevant to the interpretation and application of these results. First, this study employed a cross-sectional design that does not allow inferences of causality. Anti-LG attitudes may cause perceptions of desecration rather than the reverse relationship. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify the causal relationship between perceptions of desecration and anti-LG attitudes. Second, the sample consisted of college



students at a Midwestern university, limiting generalizability to individuals of different ages, education levels, and regions. This study needs to be replicated in more diverse samples to determine the degree to which these results apply to different groups. Third, this study utilized a self-report survey with relatively high face validity. Combining self-report data with covert measures of prejudice may provide a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the relationship between perceptions of desecration and prejudice. However, it is important to note that participants in this study endorsed agreement with desecration messages despite the use of face valid measures and the potential social undesirability of these attitudes.

Finally, this study assessed prejudicial attitudes rather than acts of discrimination or hostile behaviors. Therefore, conclusions regarding the relationship between desecration and prejudicial acts such as in the case of Matthew Shepard cannot be made from these results. However, research indicates that individuals who engage in negative behaviors toward homosexual men endorse higher levels of negative attitudes toward gay men (Schope & Eliason, 2000). The implication of this finding is that anti-LG attitudes in response to a perceived desecration may be associated with hostile actions against LG individuals. Additional research on the relationship between perceived desecration and discriminatory behaviors is necessary to answer this question.

Despite the limitations cited above, this study points to various directions for future research. First, research should explore additional factors that impact perceptions of desecration, such as exposure to counterdesecration messages and the belief that the desecration was committed intentionally versus unknowingly. Identification of these factors may help prevent the development and exacerbation of prejudice. Second, researchers should consider other factors that may mediate the relationship between perceptions of desecration and prejudice, such as forgiveness and empathy. Empirical examination of these factors may inform interventions for individuals who experience a desecration to prevent development of prejudicial attitudes. Third, previous research suggests that religious coping theory may provide a useful framework for understanding ongoing conflicts between religious groups such as Hindus and Muslims or Muslims and Jews. This study expands on these implications by suggesting that religious coping theory may aid understanding of negative views toward groups not defined by a religious affiliation. Religious coping theory may also help explain attitudes of LG individuals toward religious groups. Future research should apply religious coping theory to other religious groups and to groups unaffiliated with religious traditions in which desecration of sacred values may occur (e.g., pro-life and pro-choice groups). Religious coping theory may also promote understanding and reduction of aggressive behaviors toward LG individuals, in addition to negative attitudes as assessed in this study.

## CONCLUSIONS

The role of perceptions of desecration in the attack on Matthew Shepard and the picketing by the Westboro Baptist Church at his funeral is unclear. Certainly, a perceived desecration does not justify the violence that took his life or the hostile picketing at his funeral. However, the relationship between perceived desecration and anti-LG attitudes in this study elucidates a possible mechanism underlying development of such attitudes. In addition, the potentially protective role of religious coping found in this study and similar studies suggests that religious factors can be used to counter negative reactions to perceived desecrations of sacred values.

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