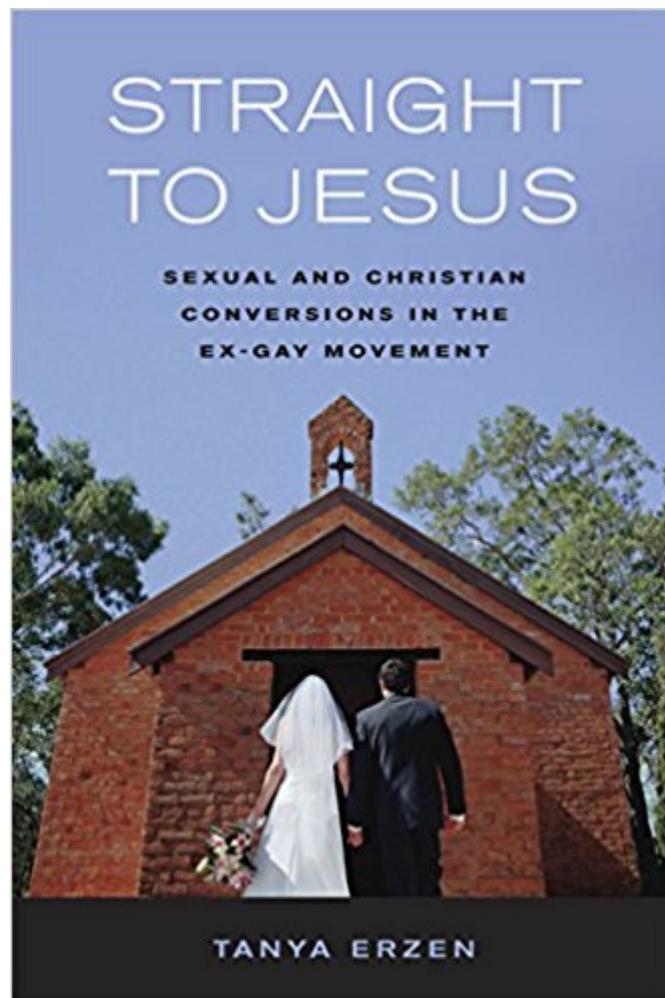




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Straight To Jesus: Sexual And Christian Conversions In The Ex-Gay Movement



Synopsis

Every year, hundreds of gay men and lesbians join ex-gay ministries in an attempt to convert to non-homosexual Christian lives. In this fascinating study of the transnational ex-gay movement, Tanya Erzen focuses on the everyday lives of men and women at New Hope Ministry, a residential ex-gay program, over the course of several years. *Straight to Jesus* traces the stories of people who have renounced long-term relationships and moved from other countries out of a conviction that the conservative Christian beliefs of their upbringing and their own same-sex desires are irreconcilable. Rather than definitively changing from homosexual to heterosexual, the participants experience a conversion that is both sexual and religious as born-again evangelical Christians. At New Hope, they maintain a personal relationship with Jesus and build new forms of kinship and belonging. By becoming what they call "new creations," these men and women testify to religious transformation rather than changes in sexual desire or behavior. *Straight to Jesus* exposes how the Christian Right attempts to repudiate gay identity and political rights by using the ex-gay movement as evidence that "change is possible." Instead, Erzen reveals, the realities of the lives she examines actually undermine this anti-gay strategy.

Book Information

Paperback: 293 pages

Publisher: University of California Press (June 27, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520245822

ISBN-13: 978-0520245822

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.7 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 9 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #214,857 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 in Books > Textbooks >

Social Sciences > Gay & Lesbian Studies #82 in Books > Gay & Lesbian > History #89

in Books > Gay & Lesbian > Nonfiction > Bisexuality

Customer Reviews

Starred Review. This is ethnography at its best: an outsider's careful, respectful translation of a subculture that is often poorly understood and easily dismissed in academic and political discourse. In this case, the subculture is religious conservatives who believe that homosexuality is a choice to be overcome. Erzen, an assistant professor of comparative studies at Ohio State University, spent a

year of intensive dissertation fieldwork in 2000 with a residential program in the ex-gay movement called New Hope. The ministry caters to men, usually from conservative Christian backgrounds, who struggle with a deeply felt contradiction between their sexual desires and their religious convictions. Erzen argues that most analysis of the ex-gay movement has failed to grasp the powerful role of religion, and how many homosexuals yearn to reconcile sexuality and faith. Her study puts complex human faces on this small piece of the ex-gay movement while at the same time providing a well-researched backdrop for where the ministry fits into ongoing debates. She has terrific chapters on the history of the ex-gay movement, the nature/nurture debate around homosexuality and the discourse of addiction that undergirds much of the ex-gay movement. Her book is likely to become a staple for college courses on political discourse, religion and sexuality. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"Erzen is sensitive, savvy, and provocative. Her mastery of historical sources, ethnographic technique, and accessible writing style are evident throughout. She illuminates aspects of conservative Christianity central to the 'culture wars,' deepening our understanding of the movement's internal struggles over sexuality, gender, and family issues. Erzen has written a wonderful book." - Diane Winston, author of *Red-hot and Righteous: The Urban Religion of the Salvation Army*

This book is a thoughtful work of scholarship that significantly adds to our understanding of religious efforts to change individuals' homosexual orientation. This book should be of enormous interest to social scientists, mental health professionals, sex researchers, religious leaders, and anyone--straight, gay, ex-gay,, or ex-ex-gay--trying to make sense of the role both homosexuality and the ex-gay movement play in today's "culture wars." Erzen is Assistant Professor of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University, a very good writer, and highly sympathetic to the subjects of ethnographic research she conducted at the evangelical New Hope Ministries. Established in 1973 in a community outside San Francisco, New Hope is the oldest of five residential ex-gay programs in the United States. During her 18 months there, Erzen conducted extensive interviews with 47 men and women, with 19 follow-up interviews. She often spoke and interacted informally with these same people in other contexts, like dinners, church, and the office. She interviewed additional men and women who had completed the program and some who had left the program to live as gay-identified men. She also interviewed members and leaders of Jewish and Catholic ex-gay groups from other parts of the country. She met 60 ex-gay people in the

ministry's immediate vicinity and was provided access to New Hope's archives. Straight to Jesus is a sympathetic, sometimes poignant, portrayal of people who acutely suffer conflicts between their sexual and religious identities.

Erzen offers a great insight into one portion the controversial "ex-gay" movement. As an ethnography, Erzen dares to live among a group of persons who share very different religious perspectives and does well to narrate the complexity of the range of theological convictions in the ex-gay movement. At times, it appears Erzen's writing conveys an overly-sympathetic tone because of her own bias. This does not detract from her good work, though. As Erzen describes the lives of several members of one organization, her work raises the serious consideration about religious identity and our human bodies. What happens when my theological convictions tell me my body is wrong? More liberal perspectives point to a flaw in the theological position. More conservative perspectives lift up the flaw in the individual's choice to act in the body. The ex-gay movement, as Erzen narrates, lies somewhere in between the usual dichotomy and highlights the messy life of deep convictions at war in an embodied life.

This is an amazing book. The author clearly does not share the religious or political views of her subjects but at no point is she demeaning or anything less than sympathetic to them as human beings. This book gives a view of the ex-gay movement that is free from the propagandistic tendencies of those who have written with the goal to promote a political or social agenda. This is a must read for anyone who is interested in what the ex-gay movement is really all about. As a homosexual who was raised in an evangelical church and studied sociology I can't recommend this book strongly enough -- both for those who think they agree and for those who think they disagree with the whole ex-gay idea.

The challenge for someone like Erzen who is neither gay nor (I infer) Christian is to paint a picture of (ex?)gay Christians with real understanding rather than caricature. She does this admirably. If you want a picture of at least part of the ex-gay phenomenon that you can trust, then by all means read this book. As a gay man whose academic specialization is theology, I can testify that Erzen, while hardly a native, succeeds in grasping some of the basic conflicts of gay Christians which, from a larger perspective, might be the conflicts of any human beings trying to live an authentic spiritual life (hard enough in any time) in an age that, in large part, doesn't even try to understand. I suspect the real challenge of this book is for you to leave your prejudices behind as you read it.

This book gives us insight to what the ex-gay ministry is really about. We all have our own assumptions of what ex-gay are, but this book gives us a subjective view of what really goes on in these places.

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