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**Churches changing stance as gays gain acceptance:** In all religious traditions, inexorable social change is bringing new attitudes

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Gays and lesbians get married, raise families, attend worship services and preach from pulpits - and most of us hardly give it a second thought.

But this is the year 2032, and it's easy to forget that it has not always been this way.

Think back 25 years to 2007 - an epochal year in the annals of gay rights, at least here in Oregon. It was the year that a Democrat-controlled Legislature approved two landmark laws - the ones that banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and extended domestic partnership benefits to same-sex couples.

More significantly, religiously motivated opponents narrowly failed to gather the necessary signatures to refer the two laws to the ballot. A subsequent effort in 2008 to collect enough signatures to overturn the laws via initiative petition also failed.

Also in 2007, the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture in New York City sponsored a daylong press briefing titled "By What Authority? How Religious Traditions Think About Homosexuality." The briefing brought together top religious academicians from Jewish, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant and Muslim perspectives.

I was privileged to attend.

Here's what I think I learned that day: Whether slow or fast, whether embraced or resisted, religious institutions' views on homosexuality are changing, often imperceptibly but inexorably.

The reasons? Rabbi Elliot Dorff, professor of philosophy at American Jewish University near Los Angeles, identified two:

"Gays are much more out of the closet than even just a few years ago - and it's hard to hate someone you know and love," he said. Second, "The science is no longer soft: Homosexuality is a very complex phenomenon, a combination of nature and nurture."

Dorff said his son, who considers people's sexual orientation to be as interesting as whether they have brown or blue eyes, represents the next generation of Americans whose attitudes about homosexuality are influencing the views of organized religion.

Dorff represents the Conservative, or middle-of-the-road, branch of Judaism, which provides greater wiggle room for scriptural interpretation than some Christian traditions. Jewish scholars in 2007, he said, view the Old Testament's commentary on homosexuality to be "inherently ambiguous," consistent with a "feisty" rabbinical tradition that appreciates ambiguity.

There would seem to be less creedal uncertainty in the Catholic tradition, at least as outlined by Stephen Pope (such a fitting surname!), professor of theology at Boston College. Pope reviewed the church's teachings that see Scripture as divine law rather than historical account, and procreation and companionship as the sole purposes of male-female sexuality.

He acknowledged that the crisis of clergy sex abuse has made it even harder than usual for Catholic leaders to discuss issues of sexuality. "I hear very few sermons on sexual ethics - in fact, I've not heard one in years," he said.

But Pope, too, asserted that science is having an influence on people in the pews.

"It's causing people in the Catholic church to consider the Catholic norm," he said. "Many Catholics are finding the Catholic norms to be unsettling and unacceptable. I think change will come, but over a long, long time."

I was skeptical. How could he offer such a prediction, I asked Pope, in light of the official church doctrines he had just outlined for us? Pope paused a moment before answering.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit," he said. "God works on a very different timetable than we do."

In the mainline Protestant tradition, churches choose from among no fewer than seven different theological viewpoints on same-gender relationships, said William Stacy Johnson, a lawyer and associate professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Those viewpoints range from prohibition (gay desire and behavior is a perversion) to consecration (sexual orientation is a gift of God to be celebrated). But most mainline Protestant churches, Johnson said, fall in the category of toleration: Gays and lesbians should be welcomed into church life, but must stoically accept their tragic fate by practicing sexual abstinence.

"That's the position, but it's a highly contested position," Johnson said, "And it won't last, because it's inherently unstable: You're telling people, 'Your orientation is OK, you just can't live out your orientation.'?"

Johnson asserted that many Protestant pastors are closeted - about their support for gays and lesbians.

"They don't want this to come up because they don't want it to split the church," he said. "Pastors want to move on this - but not now. It's been called the make-or-break issue."

Pastors in the evangelical tradition are much less ambivalent, assured Stanton Jones, provost and professor of psychology at Wheaton College in Illinois. That's because the Bible's condemnation of homosexual conduct is "pervasive, absolute and severe," Jones said.

Jones regards traditional views on the Bible to be the truth, not one among many interpretations. He said many biblical scholars engage in "theological fancy footwork" in an effort to sidestep Scripture's clear intent.

"I respect those who say, 'Sometimes the Bible just gets it wrong,'" he said. "I don't agree with that, but I respect it."

Jones is an advocate of so-called conversion therapy, which seeks to help people who want to change their sexual orientation. Opponents of such therapy include the American Psychological Association, which has expressed concern about such therapies' potential harm to patients. But Jones is co-author of a study that he said found change is possible for some, and that attempts to change, on average, are not harmful.

Still, when it comes to homosexuality, "most evangelicals wrestle with conflicting instincts," Jones said. "Biology is relevant, but not as dominant as widely believed." Other factors, he said, include genetics, prenatal hormones and the nature of father-son relationships.

Evangelical views on homosexuality in 2007 may seem downright expansive compared to the perspective held by many Muslims. "This issue is still very taboo in Muslim communities around the world," Ebrahim Moosa, associate professor of Islamic studies at Duke University, said at the briefing.

In the Muslim tradition, homosexuality "is wrong by tradition, by reason, by medicine - a perversion of the natural order," Moosa said. Homosexuality is widely viewed as a threat to one's lineage or even satanic; simply raising the issue, he said, is often seen as serving a subversive or imperialist agenda.

But even Moosa wondered aloud if a younger generation will change the faith's norms.

"I know many in Muslim communities who are gay - it's like, don't ask, don't tell," he said. "Traditional Islamic thought is dying - now it's a Home Depot version: Read and interpret the Koran for yourself."

Marc Stern, legal counsel for the American Jewish Congress and an expert on church-state law, concluded the briefing by reminding everyone how much views about homosexuality had changed leading up to 2007:

"If we were having this meeting 15 or 20 years ago, we'd be talking about litigation challenging states' sodomy laws," he said.

By 2007, the issues had moved to gay marriage and gay ordination.

Could we have imagined then the aspects of homosexuality that do, and don't, occupy our thinking today, in 2032?