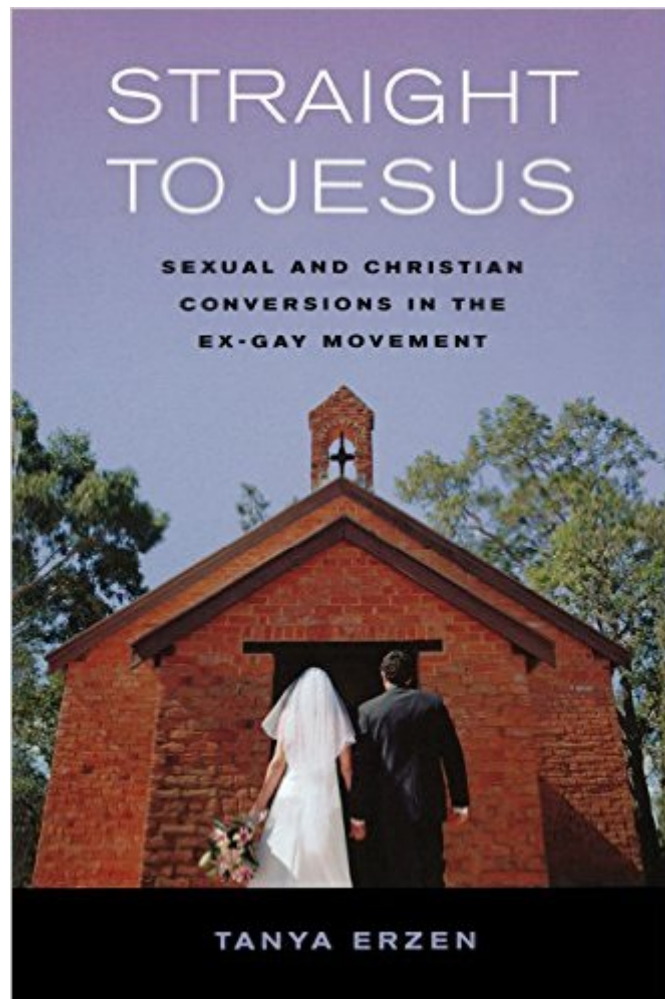


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# Straight To Jesus: Sexual And Christian Conversions In The Ex-Gay Movement



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

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.

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.

The "ex-gay movement" is one of the most controversial and polarizing subjects I know of, but Erzen manages a fair-minded and highly readable account of it. The book is based on her dissertation, the result of field work in an ex-gay ministry in San Gabriel, California, and she presents a not unsympathetic picture of the men (and a few women) involved in it. She also gives an update on the current state of the movement, and how it has moved from self-help groups to political activism in recent years. An interesting analysis explains why it is that the repeated scandals have actually tended to be a positive factor for ex-gays, by increasing public awareness.

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 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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