

“HOW CAN I FIND GOD AGAIN?”: IDENTITY CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR LGBTQ
CHRISTIANS AND FORMER CHRISTIANS AS SHAPED THROUGH SOCIAL FACTORS

by

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ABSTRACT

Historically the Christian community has not been supportive of the LGBTQ community. Church teachings of many denominations have focused on the sin of homosexuality, rather than the person who experiences same-sex attraction. Recently, many LGBTQ people have shared their experiences as gay Christians, and some denominations have begun to teach affirmation and acceptance. Despite growing acceptance, it is still difficult for LGBTQ individuals to maintain a Christian identity without exploring and reshaping their own understanding of religion's role and importance in their lives. This research seeks to add to the growing body of literature on LGBTQ Christians, by examining the resolution strategies, experiences, and familial support of LGBTQ individuals through posts and interactions on an online forum. Unlike many studies on LGBTQ Christians, this study also pays particular attention to those who abandon their Christian identity. This study finds that their experiences are similar to those who remain Christian, as they also change the way they think about these issues. The data for this project comes from participants posts on a custom, password protected website; their responses served as the data for this project. The majority of the participants are from Tennessee, which is the Buckle of the Bible Belt. Their geographic location was a factor in their development of religious identity and the overall experience with Christianity. The participants were asked about how they developed, maintained or abandoned religion through thirteen questions. For those participants who abandoned religion, and those who maintained religion it was important to shift thinking about religion. All participants describe exploring other denominations, religions and atheism in their process of resolving the conflict between religion and sexual identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion served several functions within the society of the United States and the lives of individuals. While the assumed manifest function has been to provide moral guidance to individuals, there are also significant latent functions to institutional religion among which are social support and comfort through difficult times (Shilo and Savaya 2012). More than being functional, religion is comprised of a set of beliefs, values and ideas that are passed down through traditions, and rituals. Religion is not only something a person experiences on their own as it relies on a shared ideology. This ideology is a learned social behavior; therefore, the way religion is incorporated into a person's life is affected by other members of their community. For many, religion comes to shape their personal beliefs and dictates their social ties. Due to this intimate role religion plays in individuals' lives, it becomes integrated into their identity. Religion comes to shape how persons see themselves as well as how others see them. However, what happens when this religious identity conflicts or is interpreted to be in complete contradiction with another identity? This is a frequent occurrence for gay and lesbian individuals (Mahaffy 1996; Oswald 2001; Yip 2003; Couch et al. 2008; Levy and Reeves 2011; Shilo and Savaya 2012; Wilkinson and Pearson 2013). While this conflict occurs in many religious contexts, I focus on Christianity in this study, as it is the religious majority in the United States.

Identity conflict between sexual identity and religious identity arise from both internal and external sources, which are themselves interrelated. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, overcoming identity conflict is shaped by other people and interactions. Even if a person changes his/her cognition,

he/she uses other previously held patterns to shape this cognition. Thus it becomes clear, to understand the identity negotiation of an individual, it is important to understand the source and role of social support for the individual. The purpose of this project is to better understand the role of social support as it relates to identity conflict negotiation for LGBTQ individuals. Throughout the rest of this study, discussion of past research on Christian LGBTQ individuals and the specific research methods will be outlined and discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The American Religious Climate

To best understand how religion plays a role in the lives of LGBTQ individuals, one must first understand religion in the general population. Nationwide 47.4% of the population identifies as Christian, making it the most prominent religion in the United States. The most recent census data indicates that there are 26 major Christian denominations, each of which have 750,000 or more members (Bureau 2012). The five largest denominations are: Catholic (68,503,456), Southern Baptist (16,160,088), United Methodist Church (7,774,931), the Church of Latter-day Saints (6,058,907), and Evangelical Lutheran Church (4,542,868) (Bureau 2012). Despite these seemingly large numbers, most denominations saw significant declines in the number of members from 1990 to 2008. With the exceptions of Catholicism, Baptist, and Non-denominational, all other denominations have experienced declines in the number of members. However, the growth of the number of citizens who identify as Nondenominational is the largest shift. In 1990 the census reported 194 and increased to 2,489 and increased again in 2008 to

8,032. Another significant change, however, is in the no religion specified category which went from 14,331 in 1990 to 34,169 in 2008. Of atheist, agnostic, humanist, and no religion categories, the no religion category has the highest number of individuals (30,427 in 2008). The number of individuals who declined to answer the questions related to religion also increased from 4,031 in 1990 to 11,815 in 2008 (Bureau 2012).

In recent studies, about 22% of Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated, a percentage which is consistent with the number who identify as Catholics which remains the largest denomination (Chokshi 2015; Pew 2015). This strongly supports ideas of secularism increasing in the United States. Overall these trends suggest that while the number of Christians increased, there is a decline in the number of people who identify with fundamentalist Christianity, and greater desire for more flexible individualized faith traditions.

Religiosity, and religious affiliation vary by state. Figure 1 (see Appendix D) illustrates the percentage of the population which identifies as either Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic or nonreligious by state and gives a clear picture of the widespread nature of the religiously unaffiliated. When compared to the other maps certain states or regions have an increased prevalence of one religious group, but for the unaffiliated, the percentages are fairly consistently between 10 and 33%. Evangelical Protestantism rarely reaches higher than 23 % of the population outside the Bible Belt (Chokshi 2015). While there are several possible causes for the changes in religious affiliation especially among young Americans, the statistics from the census data and Pew Research Center make it clear that the nation is becoming increasingly

secular. While some Americans may be converting to a world religion, or accepting a spiritual identity, the statistics show that there is an increase in the numbers for unaffiliated, atheist, agnostic, and nothing in particular categories.

Christianity and Formal Stances on Homosexuality

Historically, Christianity has held opposition to homosexuality; however, this is changing. A Pew research study of 35,000 American adults, in which 70 % identify as Christian (Evangelical Protestant = 25.4%, Mainline Protestant = 21.2% and Catholic = 20.8) found significant increases in the acceptance levels for homosexuality (Anon 2015). In 2007, 50% accepted homosexuality and 40% discouraged homosexuality of adults. In 2014, 62% accepted homosexuality, and 31% discouraged homosexuality. While it is generally clear that there is increased acceptance for homosexuality, the 2014 study also found that denominational differences do exist. Catholics were the most accepting at 70%, followed by Protestants with 66% support. Only 30% of Evangelical Protestant accepted homosexuality. In both the Catholic and Mainline Protestant denominations, respondents who supported discouraging homosexuality made up less than 30% of the representatives of the denominations. Fifty-five percent of Evangelicals, however discourage homosexuality (Anon 2015). It is important to note that this study examined the attitudes of individuals, not the formal stances on the issue that denominations take, but these formal stances do affect the opinions of the denominations' members (Anon 2015).

Much like individual Christians, many denominations have made, or are beginning to make some changes in their understanding and acceptance of

homosexuality. This is a slow and sometimes painstaking process as there is a very wide range of levels of acceptance for homosexuality among American Christians. Some denominations allow full membership including marriage and ordination, while others actively oppose homosexuality. This makes navigating Christianity difficult for LGBTQ individuals. While LGBTQ individuals may be able to find a church that accepts his/her sexual orientation, they may not be able to feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to others in other denominations. To understand the nuances between denominations, a brief description of denominational stances is necessary. For my study religious denominations will be discussed in groups: Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant. In order to somewhat operationalize acceptances each denomination will be examined on marriage and ordination. Ordination is the process by which new church leadership (i.e. priests, pastors, ministers) are confirmed.

The Catholic Church struggles with homosexuality. On the one hand, the church's teachings and formal positions are fairly clear in stating that homosexuality is a sin, and that the church does not approve of even committed same-sex relationships. However individual Catholics, and even some would argue Pope Francis, do not approve of discrimination towards LGBTQ people. The church has always allowed gay priests, but this is because of a vow of celibacy. Catholic churches allow gay members, but not marriage or even transgender Godparents. The Catholic church is shifting and changing its stance on many family issues including LGBTQ, but progress is slow, and does not always match that of the members (HRC 2016). This is in part because Catholicism is a global religion. American Catholics politically are relatively evenly divided across the

continuum. According to a religious landscape study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015), 37% of Catholics identify as conservative, 36% as moderate and 22% as Liberal. As for political affiliation, 37% report being Republican, 19% as moderate, and 44% as Democrat.

Mainline Protestants are the most diverse both in terms of number of denominations, and in terms of formal stances. Perhaps the most accepting Protestant denomination is the Episcopal church. Since 1976, Episcopal churches have been welcoming to LGBTQ individuals, allowing for marriage and ordination. The United Church of Christ is also accepting, performs same sex marriages and allows for the ordination of gay and lesbian people. These denominations are leaders in acceptance and often activists in the pursuit of LGBTQ rights (HRC 2016). Some denominations simply have not developed a complete stance on homosexuality. For example, the Methodist Church recognizes the worth of all people including gay and lesbian, but state that church doctrine is incompatible with homosexuality and bans support of LGBTQ groups. This disconnect has sparked a movement within the church to ignore discrimination and unjust laws. Formally however the church welcomes LGBTQ and teaches members “not to reject or condemn” LGBTQ, but does not offer marriage or ordination. Lutheran churches teach that LGBTQ people are created by God and are welcome to be involved in the church, but has no official stance on marriage. Many pastors, however, perform same-sex marriages. In 2010 the church allowed LGBTQ ordination (HRC 2016). The Presbyterian Church is fully accepting of gay and lesbian members, allowing for both marriage and ordination. The Alliance of Baptists is also welcoming of LGBTQ individuals and in

2004 adopted the formal statement protesting any law that would discriminate against LGBTQ people. Since 1987, when the Alliance of Baptists was founded, LGBTQ people have been ordained. Mainline Protestants are nearly evenly split on the political spectrum as 44% identify as Republican 40% as Democrat and 16% as moderate (Anon 2015).

The last group are Evangelical Christians. Evangelical denominations focus on spreading the gospel and upholding the belief in the Bible's authority (Anon n.d.). Some denominations included in the Evangelical category are: The Presbyterian Church in America, some Baptist, Pentecostal, Church of Christ, Assembly of God, among others. Evangelicals are politically active on a number of political issues. In a Pew study (Kohut 2006) participants were asked which should have more influence on U.S. laws, the Bible or the American people. Sixty percent of White Evangelical Christians said the Bible, compared to only 16% of White Mainline Protestants, 23% of Catholics, and 7% of secular individuals (Kohut 2006).

In the past, Southern Baptists tried to change people through gay conversion therapy. In 1996 the Southern Baptist leadership stated "even a desire to engage in a homosexual relationship is always sinful, impure, degrading, shameful, unnatural, indecent and perverted" (HRC 2016: Southern Baptist Convention). Southern Baptists coined the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" in support of their efforts to attempt to change LGBTQ individuals. Mohler, a church leader in 2011 said that Southern Baptists need to apologize for their past homophobia (HRC 2016: Southern Baptist Convention).

The church still does not allow for same-sex marriage or the ordination of gay or lesbian members (HRC 2016: Southern Baptist Convention).

Religion and American Politics

Religion is referenced in many political issues in America. Most of these issues are social issues, such as, women's reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, and teaching evolution in schools. While studies show that overall Christians are increasingly accepting of secular beliefs (i.e. evolution) and homosexuality, there is a clear divide among Christian Americans on these and other issues (Kohut 2006; Lipka and Wormald 2016). With this in mind, while overall other denominations are beginning to indicate that changes may be coming to formal stances due to internal pressure, conservative Christian groups have been arguing for government intervention which protects their rights and limits the rights of LGBTQ individuals.

The Christian Right, primarily fundamentalist denominations including Evangelical Protestants, differ from other religious groups and churches in more than just their religious beliefs, and practices, but in how they want to see religion used in legislation. Conservative Christians argue that their way of life, and personal beliefs are threatened by an increasingly secular reality in America. Some studies have found that these conservatives fear their children will learn to hold secular values and view Christian values as backwards and wrong. As a result, conservative Christians demand religious freedom and impose their Christian world view on others (Macgillivray 2008). As a result of a fear of losing their Christian values, conservative Christian groups have been lobbying for Religious Freedom Reformation Act. Currently twenty states have RFRA,

six have worked on passing some sort of RFRA, and another six have tried and failed to pass such legislation that explicitly allow businesses and individuals to discriminate against LGBTQ individuals on the grounds of religion (Johnson 2015). These laws protect businesses if they chose to fire or refuse to hire an LGBTQ person, or refuse service to LGBTQ people. It also affects health insurance, adoption, and housing. In twenty states lesbian and gay individuals are not protected classes for employment and in twenty-nine states sexual orientation is not protected by equal housing laws (Anon 2016). All of the states in the Bible Belt do not consider sexual orientation a protected class.

Christianity and Being LGBTQ

As a socializing factor, religion affects how parents talk to their children about sexuality (Roth and Kroll 2007). In their study, Roth and Kroll used the General Social Survey to determine adolescents' sexual risk-talking behaviors in relation to their religious background. Youth were more likely to hold the belief that traditional gender roles are perceived as normal, and deviation is frowned upon. This was especially true for those youth informed by fundamentalist denominations. Sexual scripts are shaped by religion and provide different roles for men and women. Studies have found that girls are more likely to ignore their feelings of attraction and arousal than boys and it is mediated by religion, this results in later discovery of same-sex attraction, and less sexual risk taking behavior in women (Roth and Kroll 2007; Wilkinson and Pearson 2013).

Similarly, Wilkinson and Pearson's study of religious context surrounding same-sex attraction among adolescents found that due to the heteronormative stance of fundamentalists, church attendance in these fundamentalist churches negatively predicts

supporting civil rights for the LGBTQ community. The study used adolescent health data for analysis, and operationalized for fundamentalist belief patterns (Wilkinson and Pearson 2013).

Due to a range of levels of acceptance and often politically charged conversations about sexuality and religion, navigating a Christian identity as an LGBTQ person is often a stressful process (Mahaffy 1996; Oswald 2001; Yip 2003; Couch et al. 2008; Levy and Reeves 2011; Wilkinson and Pearson 2013). For individuals there is a wide range of options, changing the way one interprets or understands religious teaching, changing denomination to fit with their identity, beliefs or values, or abandoning formal religion altogether. Relationships play a factor in this decision making process because acceptance, support and belonging may need to be renegotiated. In spite of the negative perspectives on homosexuality found in some denominations' official positions, many LGBTQ individuals are able to incorporate the two identities, though not without some degree of identity conflict.

Previous descriptive studies have examined the number of LGBTQ individuals who have changed religious affiliation from the one in which they were raised. The findings of the study were that 50.8% of gay men and 59.6% of lesbians who were surveyed either changed religious affiliation or abandoned religion (Couch et al. 2008). This means that some LGBTQ individuals are able to remain in the religious affiliation that they grew up in, and that LGBTQ individuals negotiate or change cognitions allowing this to happen. Studies have also found that most LGBTQ individuals between the ages of 14 and 21 have abandoned their childhood religion (Shilo and Savaya 2012).

Other studies have examined LGBTQ Christians' beliefs about religious practices, institutionalized churches and the Bible. Many were critical of institutional religion and had rejected the moral authority of the church in the area of sexuality (Yip 2003).

Many Christian denominations are beginning to recognize that an increasing number of people are questioning religion as a result of the historically harsh critiques of the LGBTQ community, women, and an overall disconnect between teaching and practice. As a result, many are reconsidering their formal stances on a number of contemporary issues. For example, Catholic Bishops have been meeting on issues of the family. New rhetoric emerging from these meetings signal softening the church's stance on LGBTQ individuals, cohabitators, and divorced members of the church (Neuman 2014). Many denominations welcome women as leaders and some allow openly gay pastors. There are Christian denominations that are welcoming to the LGBTQ community. The development of congregations and larger church communities have encouraged some to return to the pews. Episcopal Churches have seen some increase in younger membership in part due to the welcoming nature of the church community. In most cases that use the free exercise clause, a portion of the first amendment which is used to support RFRA, churches or religious organizations argue that they should be exempt from a government policy, for example performing same sex marriages, or offering contraceptives to employees. In an amazing twist on the free exercise clause, a United Church of Christ in North Carolina used the free exercise clause to petition for the repeal of the same-sex marriage ban in the state, arguing that since their church believes that same-sex couples have the right to marry, banning the institution was a violation of

their religious practice (Peralta 2014). All of these examples signal that some denominations are willing to adapt and change to meet their members' needs.

With the nationwide lift on the same-sex marriage ban, many are expecting overall attitudes to shift to acceptance of lesbian and gay individuals. However, opposition is still expected to come on the grounds of religion. In addition, transgender issues are largely unaffected by the lift of the same-sex marriage ban, and therefore it is unlikely to shift attitudes on these issues. However, it is an important first step towards a more accepting society.

Identity and Identity Conflict

Identity is the way a person sees himself or herself in a particular role. Identity is learned through social interactions and agreed upon by the society (Marcussen 2006). Individuals protect their sense of self and identity through maintaining self-relevant perceptions. This protection process involves the acceptance of positive or reassuring perceptions and rejecting perceptions which do not fit a particular identity. However, conflict between identities and within identities does occur, because it is impossible to protect perfectly, and to maintain a consistent self-image in all situations (Marcussen 2006). Psychological distress, most often measured in terms of anxiety and depression, occur more frequently when an individual is unable to maintain or fulfill her/his perceived obligations in a particular role.

Stigma can be a factor in identity development. Stigma is assigned to certain characteristics or traits and is identifiable when society perceives an individual who possesses that characteristic to be untrustworthy and as a result treats that individual

differently. Homosexuality is stigmatized in society, especially by Evangelical Protestant Christians. Individuals living with stigma, internalize these negative attitudes and sometimes treat themselves negatively as a result. For LGBTQ individuals this is called internalized homophobia and it often results in significant psychological distress (Shilo and Savaya 2012). Stigma is often applied to minorities as well. Meyer's (2009) minority stress theory describes five types of stresses: general stress, prejudice events, expectations of rejection, and hiding the minority status, in this case hiding sexual orientation, and internalization of societal stigma, in this case homophobia (Shilo and Savaya 2012; Meyer 2009)

As previously discussed, religion is a socializing agent, and is shared with others. Conservative denominations, through text and formal teaching, sets up a heteronormative reality which those attracted to the same sex cannot meet. The result is an individual who experiences psychological distress due to conflict within the Christian identity and conflict between the Christian identity and the sexual identity. Christian ideology, while changing, is slow to dismantle the heteronormative structures which are in many ways pervasive and central to the institution. As a result, Christianity also perpetuates traditional gender roles. Surprisingly this can even persist in gay affirming denominations and churches as well. During his ethnographic field work in a LGBT Christian organization in the southeastern United States, Sumerau found that when the church found a new pastor, he encouraged the gay men to hold traditional roles including being dominant in the church community. This is surprising because many within the LGBTQ community do not identify with gender binaries or with traditional roles (Sumerau 2012).

For LGBTQ individuals the conflict within the Christian identity is likely to persist until Christianity as a whole reshapes its ideology. This leaves the conflict between the two identities for the individual to address. The conflict between Christian identity and sexual identity has been subject of a substantial amount of research in psychology and sociology.

Resolving the Conflict

It is clear from previous research that conflict does occur, and that it can be negotiated, but does not appear to be easily resolved. Researchers of cognitive dissonance suggest that the magnitude of the dissonance is a result of the importance of the components creating that dissonance (Mahaffy 1996). Some researchers also suggest that changes in thinking or the rejection of one component is the best way for an individual to maintain her/his sense of self (Mahaffy 1996). In this case the more important the sexual identity and Christian identity are to the individual, the greater the impact the conflict has on the individual. In this perspective, the two identities fight to retain their relevance to the individual. This model would predict that most people who experience same sex attraction would reject either the Christian identity or their sexual identity, however this only occurs about half of the time (Couch et al. 2008). The option of changing individual thoughts about religion, or changing the social environment in which religion is practiced are other options. Studies have found that the source of tension, as in internal or external, and age are predictors of which of these three strategies are used (Mahaffy 1996).

Lesbians who identified as religious, prior to identifying as lesbian were more likely to struggle with identity than those who identified as religious after identifying as

lesbian (Mahaffy 1996). Other research has found that black, gay men resolve the conflict in four ways, rejecting the sexual identity, rejecting the religious identity, compartmentalizing, or integrating the two identities (Pitt 2010). Later research found an outcome model for possible resolution strategies (Levy and Reeves 2011: 58) made up of the following five solutions:

1. Rejecting their sexual identity
2. Rejecting their Christian identity
3. Integrating the two identities
4. Compartmentalizing
5. Living with the conflict.

The study of this resolution process has revealed that it is fairly individualized, but also a social process. The five stage process proposed by Levy and Reeves (2011: 58) goes as follows: 1) individuals become aware that there is a conflict between church teaching and their sexuality, 2) individuals respond to the conflict often through several means including secrecy, increased religious involvement, and for some depression, 3) individuals continue to with their initial response until a catalyst encourages them to change, this stage is individualized, but for some this could be a traumatic event such as losing a family member, 4) individuals begin to work through the conflict by using a combination of information seeking, reflection, discussion, and new behaviors, 5) individuals feel that conflict is resolved and experience an acceptance for their sexual identity usually characterized by a personalized faith. It is clear that in particular the third

and fourth step rely on social factors. I believe the resolution strategy selected is based on these key steps and the social interactions which take place in each.

While the research seems to suggest that the conflict can be resolved, there are other studies that suggest that this process is ongoing. Oswald found that LGBTQ individuals feel like outsiders-within during family weddings, even if they were still actively involved in the same denomination (Oswald 2001). This suggests that even when the identities are integrated, there is still the possibility of conflict and feeling outside of the religious group. This suggests that LGBTQ individuals constantly negotiate the two identities based on the context and social support.

Social Support

Other research has focused on social support, but not in relation to the LGBTQ identity and religious identity. Social support is important to the well-being and mental health of individuals (Horning, Davis, Stirrat, and Cornwell 2011). Studies on religion have found that individuals who participate in organized religion had greater social support, and were less depressed than non-religious individuals (Shilo and Savaya 2012). While religious individuals tend to have higher levels of well-being and mental health, often attributed to larger social networks, studies of non-religious people have found that religiosity was not correlated to well-being. This finding implies that non-religious people may find social support from other sources, and that perhaps social support has more to do with people coming together for a common goal than strictly for religious practice (Horning et al. 2011).

LGBTQ individuals tend to encounter more stress due to their stigmatized position in society, this means that social support is important for reducing stress, improving well-being, and mental health. While many LGBTQ individuals turn to others within the LGBTQ community for support, this group is not the primary group when a person first discloses their sexual orientation. While most youth disclose their orientation first to peers (Shilo and Savaya 2012), the group that is most influential on well-being and mental health is still the family. LGBTQ adults who were not supported by parents experienced increased risk taking behaviors such as drug use, alcohol abuse, and increased psychological distress such as suicide attempts and depression (Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes and Boehmer 2012). Several studies have shown that family support helps ease the process of gay and lesbian identity formation (Rothman et al. 2012) and that this support can help predict self-esteem and well-being for gay and lesbian individuals (Frale, Wortman and Joseph 1997).

Family's support however, is often connected to their religiosity. Youth who fear rejection because of the religiosity of family members are less likely to disclose their sexual orientation to them (Shilo and Savaya 2012). The family is especially important to this study due to its role in socialization of Christianity. Studies of LGBTQ individuals who attended family weddings found that many experienced a social distance or outsider-within perspective during the ceremony (Oswald 2001). This was consistent for individuals who currently were practicing the same religion that they grew up in. The social distance was sometimes attributed to the religious nature of the event, the scripture, or even family members' attitudes towards them (Oswald 2001). Religion is often shared

by members of the same family and therefore religious identity can become connected to the sense of belonging within a family. The family's religious practices and support likely shape the way gay and lesbian individuals negotiate the two identities.

In summary, LGBTQ individuals face a complex and unique identity conflict between their sexual identity and religious identity. This conflict exists in part because of the formal teachings of some Christian denominations. While some denominations are accepting of LGBTQ identity, those that are not have great influence over the political conversation surrounding issues the LGBTQ community faces daily. Despite acceptance by some, the larger social environment surrounding LGBTQ identity places them outside religion and Christian groups. While for many, according to demographic studies, this results in leaving organized religion, there are those who maintain a religious identity. Past research has shown that these individuals undergo identity conflict resolution comprising of five parts (Levy and Reeves 2009).

In this study, I further investigate resolution strategies, and the process of conflict resolution. I also focus on the roles of family, friends, and the community on the resolution process. Through an online forum and survey with individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer I seek to understand how LGBTQ people reshape or abandon their religious beliefs. On the online discussion board, I asked questions about the role of religion and discussions of religion throughout the coming out process. I am interested in the identity conflict, negotiation of the identities, and social support found both from family and non-family.

METHOD

To understand how LGBTQ individuals work through the conflict between religious identity and sexual identity, I developed a forum style website designed specifically for this research project. Identity conflict, especially related to issues that are considered private in American society, like religion and sexuality, prompted me to find a method which offered privacy and support for participants who may be experiencing some discomfort at this time. The internet seemed to be the perfect venue to allow people to respond to questions anonymously, but still interact and offer support to one another should they need it.

This research utilizes two main methods of data collection; a brief general survey and an online forum. The website I created for this research, allows participants to create a user id and answer sets of questions about religion, relationships, and sexuality. Their comments and questions were the main source of data for the research. I posted 13 questions as found in Appendix A (page 60) to the forum over the course of six weeks. Posts were staggered for the first three weeks and the last three weeks all 13 questions were available for participants to post responses. Prior to each set of questions, I emailed participants to let them know there were new questions available for response. For the security of the participants, they were required to login to gain access to the forum. During the initial login, participants completed a brief demographics survey and read the informed consent form. It was at this time they provided their email to be informed about new posts on the forum. To allow the participants some confidentiality there were also opportunities for them to respond to posts through a private message sent directly to the

researcher. The forum format also allowed the participants to post their own questions or comments to which others could respond. This feature was utilized by some and posed great questions about reconciling religion in the transgender community.

Participants made posts sharing their stories and experiences with religion, and family over a month. They also had the opportunity to pose questions to the group. Analysis of the posts and surveys was completed using line by line open coding (Warren and Karner 2010:218). During this process I identified themes and coded participants' responses for the resolution stages outlined in Levy and Reeves' research and sources of social support. I also looked for emerging themes in the posts and surveys. In reading the posts, I noticed trends in parents' or family responses to coming out, the process participants went through as they modified their religious beliefs or abandoned them. Once I identified a common narrative, I looked for other similarities between participants, such as current religious belief to identify if there was a possible correlation.

The Website

The website was created on a free website creation website called Wix. This site allowed me to create a personalized website in just a few days without using complicated code or software. I included five pages on my website: home, general survey, about, resources and religious experience forum. The home page included information about the research and explained the process. Initially, it also included the general survey, which I created using a form application. I later moved it to its own tab for user convenience. The about page offers more information about the research and the researcher. As a feminist researcher I feel that it is important to be reflexive with participants and I also wanted

them to feel that it was acceptable to share their intimate experiences. On this page I disclosed my own experiences as a queer, questioning Catholic. I felt it would not be appropriate to include my experiences in the forum, but felt that the participants might click on the tab to learn more. The resources tab offered information about different religious groups, recent news about affirming churches and religious organizations, as well as links to mental health counseling, should participants find they needed support. The religious experience forum, however was the most important tab and included a list of forum questions and responses to the questions. I posted 13 questions on this page, participants started four threads or topics. I received 58 posts in response to the questions posed. These 58 posts contained the bulk of the data collected.

Online Discussion Board as Source for Data Collection

There are several reasons for choosing an online means of data collection. Perhaps most important, is the comfort of the participants. The rise of social media means that Americans in general are more comfortable having conversations online than at any other point in history. The growth and success of social media has greatly affected how people communicate and relate to others. Critics of social media suggest that internet activities take away from an individual's face to face time with family and friends, and that this reduced social circle may result in increased levels of loneliness and depression. However, it has been found, that internet users may already be lonely and turn to the internet to fill the need for social interaction (Antoci et. al 2014). Due to LGBTQ identities being highly stigmatized in society, many may feel more comfortable in supportive online spaces. Many LGBTQ youths turn to chat rooms and webpages prior to

coming out or shortly after because there is a sense of community and belonging without the fear of homophobia or judgment or rejection. Previous research has found that 70% of LGB young adults used the internet as the primary source of information seeking during a time of sexual identity exploration (Bond 2009). This means that it is a comfortable environment that the population is accustomed to using for these types of discussions. It may be uncomfortable to meet with a researcher and talk about issues of religion, coming out, and homophobia, but it may be comfortable to post a typed response under a username. The internet also allows individuals who live in rural areas access to others in the LGBTQ community, when they otherwise may not interact or know anyone else who identifies with in the LGBTQ community. Chat rooms, forums and other interactive webpages are an existing part of the LGBTQ community and therefore are generally comfortable.

Overall the anonymity that is provided online lends itself well to sharing intimate feelings and experiences without feeling that one is at risk of greater stigmatization. This is important for this project as it addresses the intersection of two highly personal and often considered private issues of religion and sexuality. By allowing participants to post using a user id, they can openly share experiences that are often associated with experiences of rejection, and homophobia. While the internet is public, there are a number of examples of sites that allow individuals to share experiences with others in a semi private setting. Beyond chatrooms and social media, online therapy has been an option since 1995. A study of the effectiveness of such methods, has found that they are about as effective as face to face therapy (Murphy 2009).

The internet is beginning to be used as a resource and research tool more frequently. It is not uncommon to conduct surveys on websites such as SurveyMonkey, or use social media sites such as Facebook to recruit participants. There have been studies that have used chat room conversations as data. While these types of studies are becoming more routinely used, they do pose ethical concerns. When conducting research on an existing chat room or website, the administrator must be contacted for permission and ideally the members or users of the site will then be informed of the research that is taking place. Some researchers have used live chat websites to conduct interviews or focus groups. However, many websites do sell visitor data to companies for advertising. The popular dating website OkCupid, uses the data collected from the members' quizzes and pages for more than creating matches; the site actually collects data that is used for research on topics such as alcoholic beverage preference and sexual risk taking behavior. While there have not been many studies conducted on a website specifically created with the intention of studying the content as data, all of these examples are to argue that creating a website whose sole purpose is to collect data is not an ethical violation and could have significant advantages in data collection.

The website I created is password protected which secures participants posts from non-participants. The participants are aware that their posts are being used for research and that the website exists through the duration of the project. This is distinctly different from research which uses an existing site. In the existing site method, it is possible for individuals who are members to miss the disclosure of the research, and make posts that they would not want to be included in a study. In addition, creating my own site gave me

an opportunity to set the community standards and determine how the site was used. When researchers use existing websites, the researcher gives up control of topics of discussion, as well as the use of the website. While for research topics that may be studied in a web-based ethnography format in which the existing group dynamic and reason for the website are what is being investigated this not a problem that is not the goal of this particular study.

My goal in using a discussion board format is that participants develop a sense of community and learn from one another. The process of understanding the role of religion and conflict resolution can be traumatic for individuals and can leave some feeling isolated from friends, family, and a religious community. Sharing stories and advice of how to get through that tough time, may help individuals understand that they are not alone in their experiences. In addition to the support of the researcher, and fellow participants, the website includes links to resources that may help individuals, including welcoming churches, and mental health resources.

Drawbacks to Online Data Collection

There are downsides to using a web based method of sampling and data collection. Web based research is prone to having low retention rates. Often because the participant is asked to work without the researcher present and often for extended periods of time it is difficult to ensure that participants will remain involved for the duration of the project. To help address this I also created a survey mostly containing demographic questions, but also the main questions that relate to the project. This will ensure that even if a participant only took the time to create an account that I still received some useable

data. This survey is located in the Appendix and contains questions about religious affiliation(s) and current religious practices. I sent emails when a new question or post was created that I wanted everyone or groups to answer. By contacting the participants using the email address that they provide when creating an account some participants were encouraged to continue posting. Using the internet does create a non-representative sample because of unequal accessibility of the internet. While this has improved in recent years, it is likely that the sample will be middle and upper class.

The Sample

All participants identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. This was the only requirement for participants; religious identity was not required however the nature of the questions prompted responses from individuals who at some point in their lives identified with religion. Participants were recruited to take part in the study through a snowball sampling method beginning with my own personal contacts and Middle Tennessee State University Lambda. MTSU Lambda sent a recruitment email to their members on my behalf. The majority of participants responded to that email. I did reach out to other LGBTQ organizations through email and Facebook. A few participants responded from this method.

As I noted one main critique of online data collection has to do with high dropout rates and varying degrees of participation. This study did struggle with these common issues. While dropout rate was not an issue due to the casual nature of an online forum, as expected, there were varying degrees of participation. I received 26 completed surveys, but only 11 unique participants posted in the forum. Of these 11 participants some

responded to all or nearly all of the questions, while others only responded to one post. It was clear that some did not answer questions that did not pertain to them. For example, some who identified as atheist did not respond to posts pertaining to their current religious community. While I initially intended to use the surveys to connect the posts with the participant, some responded thoroughly enough for the survey to serve as data in its own right. For these surveys I examined how individuals' denomination/religion and religious involvement changed over time. This proved to be helpful to understanding religious mobility.

THE PARTICIPANTS

There are two sets of participants for the study. The first are the posters, these eleven participants took the time to post their responses to questions in the forum. Their ages ranged from 20-39 with most posters being younger than 25 ($n = 7$). All had at least some college ($n = 2$) experience and most had completed or are currently in graduate school ($n = 5$). Two identified as multiracial. There are five male participants and six female participants. In terms of gender, however, there are two cisgender men, five cisgender women, one transgender male to female, two who identified as queer, and one unspecified.

In terms of religion the majority of posters came from very or extremely religious families ($n = 8$). However, five identify as atheist or agnostic, and seven responded that they never attend any kind of religious group. While this makes the posters seem nonreligious, there are some who maintain a religious identity and there is some variety of religions practiced. Within the posters group the most common response to religious

affiliation (besides atheist) is spiritual (n = 3). When asked about denominations or religious affiliations two identify as Episcopalian, one as non-denominational, and one as Jewish. Paganism also was discussed by several of the posters, however only one identifies as Pagan.

Also included in this study are 13 participants who only completed the survey and are considered the second set of participants. For the most part these participants were younger than the posters with nearly all under the age of 25 (n = 11). This group was also mostly white, but included three people of color bringing the total for the study to five. There are seven male participants and eight female participants who did not participate in the forum. Of these one identifies as queer and another as female to male transgender. Despite being younger in age the surveyed participants are also highly educated, most had some college (n = 7), but some have obtained a master's degree (n = 3). The rest have a bachelor's degree or are working towards a master's degree.

In regards to religion, again participants report that religion was very or extremely important to their family (n = 9). This group, however was less decisive as far as identity. When asked about attendance many said never (n = 7), however several responded that religion was important to them, and some indicated that religious affiliation was not applicable to them rather than accepting an atheist, or agnostic identity. Unfortunately, since they did not participate in the forum all that can be speculated is that they are evolving in their identity, but it is unclear what factors are effecting this transition. This being said the surveyed participants had two participants who maintained their childhood religion. One maintained as Catholic and one as Methodist. In addition, three identified as

non-denominational. Again Paganism (n = 2) and spiritual (n = 3) are noteworthy identities.

Geographic Region and Religion: The Buckle of the Bible Belt

The vast majority of all participants grew up in an area of the country known as the Bible Belt. In this region of the country Christianity is the dominant religion and church attendance is higher than the national average. The Bible Belt also has the highest percentage of Evangelical Christians in the country. The Bible Belt is in the southeast and central United States and includes: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Tennessee in particular is a significant state in the Bible Belt. Tennessee is often considered the buckle of the Bible Belt because of its shape and its location in the middle of the belt. Of the total participants nine grew up in and currently live in Tennessee. An additional nine participants moved to Tennessee, some moved with their families and others for school. Of these only three moved from northern states (New Jersey, Ohio and Michigan) to Tennessee. The remaining six moved from other states in the Bible Belt, such as Florida, Arkansas, Georgia, and South Carolina. The study also included four participants that have never lived in Tennessee; three were from Ohio, one of which moved to California, and the other lives in Michigan.

As Figure 2 found in Appendix E helps illustrate, the most recent Pew poll shows that states in the Bible Belt are more religious than other states. Tennessee ranked third in religiosity, behind Alabama and Mississippi in four out of five of the measures: 73% of

adults identify as highly religious, 71% say religion is very important in their lives, 70% say they pray daily, 78% say they believe in God with absolutely certainty. Tennessee ranked second in the final measure of church attendance with 51% of respondents reporting at least weekly attendance. For comparison, Ohio, the state with the second highest number of participants, ranked 17th in the same Pew study, and only 58% of adults identify as highly religious (Lipka and Wormald 2016).

Undoubtedly, the culture of the geographic region where a person grew up has an impact on how they view or experience religion, especially for those from the Bible Belt, where participants describe Christianity as insidious.

I was born and raised in the Bible belt. Every person I knew growing up was Christian. Naturally, I identified as Christian myself as that was the only thing I knew. As a little girl, I never even realized there were other religions out there, that's how prevalent Christianity was in my life.

Ashley

Later in the same posts, Ashley discusses meeting her aunt who was Pagan, as the first experience she has had with someone who was not Christian. She was 13. The lack of exposure to other religions or ways of thinking, for this participant lead to reluctance to accept her agnostic and bisexual identities. Her post also points to the omnipresent nature of Christianity in this region of the country.

Church membership has been used as a variable in many studies to illustrate social integration and community involvement. While nationwide trends are shifting away from church membership, it retains more importance in the Bible Belt than in other regions of the country. It could be argued that church membership, or at least Christian identity are key components to having a southern identity. It is important therefore, to discuss LGBTQ experiences in attempting to find a church. One participant who moved

from the north to Tennessee, found it impossible to be integrated into a church community.

When I moved to Tennessee. I was in culture shock! It was the most awful feeling- as I went from church to church- all different places and denominations- and I was told "You don't fit here and we don't want you!" After 4 years of searching and being told this horrific thing again and again, I gave up.

Melre

In this post Melre discusses leaving the brick and mortar churches due to cultural differences. In other posts, Melre explains that even Gay affirming churches, were unwelcoming to her and her family. This post illustrates a disconnect between “Southern Hospitality” and unwelcoming area for those who are different.

Later in this paper I will discuss the frustration at the disconnect between church teachings of love and the hate filled rhetoric that is attributed to some Christian groups, but for now I want to continue to focus on regional effects of such rhetoric. Some participants describe an environment in which Christianity takes on different meaning and tone than what most Christians would use. Perhaps what she is referring to is the prevalence and power of conservative, Evangelical Christian ideology that is highest in the Bible Belt, and particularly Tennessee. Again Figure 1 (Appendix D) shows that the greatest concentration of these ideas come from Tennessee, Arkansas and Oklahoma. Also it is important to recall that studies (Kohut 2006; Macgillivray 2008; Anon 2015) have found that Evangelical Christians hold different opinions than all other denominations in the United States, but particularly in a region where the number of Evangelicals is twice that of other denominations. It is fairly clear that their views are the loudest and most prominent, extending beyond Sunday mornings.

The influence of Christianity extends beyond churches or Christian spaces. One participant stated that she is frustrated that “extreme Christian thinking [that] is pushed on my children in PUBLIC schools” in Tennessee. This suggests that there is an assumption that all students and parents share the same conservative Christian values and would want those messages in any classroom regardless of state funding. This further illustrates that there is a cultural difference which emphasizes Christianity above other ideologies. Several participants also implied that they felt that extreme Christian ideologies are influencing politics.

I am hyper critical when people in positions of authority use them (scripture) to dictate laws or policy against a group of people. I have a strict policy of respecting other people's beliefs until the point that they try and impact people's lives based on those beliefs.

Derktheactore

Other participants also tied the use of scripture or religious ideology to dismiss scientific fact and influence policy as particularly distressing. While these are issues nationwide, it does appear to happen more frequently and perhaps with greater success in the Bible Belt. Participants also drew particular attention to women’s reproductive issues as well as LGBTQ issues as evidence of this bias occurring.

FAITH OUTCOMES

Changes in Faith

One characteristic that nearly all participants have in common is a change in denomination, religion, involvement, or abandoning religion altogether, which is consistent with previous studies. In this study, participants fell into three categories: left religion in favor of new religion, left religion by abandoning organized religion or belief in God, and found new denomination. There were only two religions to which

participants converted: Paganism and Judaism. Three participants turned to a spiritual alternative like Paganism, while one converted to Judaism. Many more people abandoned religion altogether. Three became agnostic, three responded not applicable to current denomination or religion, and five identified as atheist. Five participants left one denomination of Christianity and found another, most commonly non-denominational.

All but two participants changed their denomination, religion, or abandoned religion altogether. The participants who maintained the denomination that they grew up in were not immune to seeking out other faith traditions, or experiencing a change in their religiosity. The first participant, fd5067 was active in the Catholic church with family during her youth. She attended Catholic school through college. She reported that for four years she did not practice Catholicism and investigated other faith traditions such as Judaism and Islam, but returned to Catholicism. She reports that she is still evolving in her religion, despite weekly attendance. The second, Shirosakura, attended a Southern Baptist church as a young child, but later her family converted to United Methodist. She participated in many youth activities including choir and served as a youth usher. She currently reports that she attends church less than 12 times per year. This is a fairly dramatic shift from an active church goer. While she did not elaborate on why this occurred and it is possible that much like all young adults, school and work interfere with regular attendance, it is doubtful this is the case. These two participants are also participants of color, one identifies as middle eastern and the other as black. Both cultures are known to be less accepting of LGBTQ identity, however neither participant elaborated on their experiences or what prompted them to stay in their faith tradition.

These trends are in line with national averages and past studies of LGBTQ individuals, however given that most participants live in the Bible Belt these results are atypical for their region. This supports the idea that conflict between sexual identity and religious identity exists and must be resolved. Even for those who remained in their denomination, the decision was not made without exploring other options or experiencing less involvement than in the past. While religious leaders might suggest that it is natural or necessary to undergo questioning of faith or a conflict of faith, when this experience is universal to the experiences of a group of people it would appear that there is a systemic issue driving the phenomenon. To explore this phenomenon, I will examine homophobic rhetoric and social support as well as examine the two common resolutions: abandoning religion and changing religion.

Encountering Homophobia and Religion as Support for Hate

I have attended many different churches. In all of the churches, LGBTQ+ peoples and "life styles" were never really discussed. I never heard hate, but I also never heard affirmation. At least not so blatantly.

Anonymous

Few participants reported hearing homophobic rhetoric at church or from their church, but nearly all reported seeing or hearing religion and church teachings against LGBTQ "lifestyles" on websites or in their community. Their posts seem to suggest that when religion is used to justify homophobia, or in hate speech, it is most likely going to come in a casual setting and unfortunately from people the individuals know personally whether someone on social media or the person's family. Those who did explicitly experience homophobia typically did not elaborate on those experiences in great detail.

From birth until age 13 I was a member of an Independent Baptist church. Around the age of 13 I refused to keep attending that church, and have

never gone back. I attended a few Southern Baptist churches and one nondenominational church in my teens. A few really bad experiences ended my career as a Baptist.

Emeraldwillow64

Emeraldwillow64's response to leaving the independent Baptist church and trying a Southern Baptist is not uncommon. Several participants described going to a church very similar or in the same denomination before they tried a completely different church altogether. Many did not address why they left one church and tried another, but it is pretty clear that Emeraldwillow64 experiences were mostly negative, resulting in an atheist identity. While Emeraldwillow64 did not elaborate on her experiences, another former Baptist did explain in a little more detail what they experienced.

I grew up Baptist and participated in multiple services a week, including youth group. From there I switched to a nondenominational when they (Baptist youth group) asked me to hand out anti-gay pamphlets at school.

Kweenkerra

Participants reported youth groups were a common place where they felt the most need to remain closeted. Several reported that had they come out, they would have been kicked out of the group. The youth group's role is as a socializing agent that encourages belonging and forges social connections that are important for developing a connection and understanding of a religious group. However, for LGBTQ individuals these factors can backfire and push them out of the community rather than draw them in. Part of youth group is the explicit teaching of the Bible, church doctrine, and formal stances on social issues. It would seem that if a church would ever explicitly say something about homosexuality it would be in youth group. Youth groups typically are very active in their church and community. The nature of this close knit group would put LGBTQ

individuals in a position to remain quiet about their sexuality or be ostracized from the group. These early messages likely play a large role in the overall withdrawal from religion including low involvement with church groups and activities as an adult.

Few participants describe being asked to leave a church after they aged out of youth group. It is important to note that part of this is that overall the sample self-elected not to be involved in a religious setting or group, therefore, few were actively seeking church membership, or a church community to which to belong. One participant, however did describe struggling with many denominations and acceptance.

I have been to every denomination. I have tried “open” churches. Every time I leave with my kids we have a 2-hour discussion about why we are just better off with the relationship to God that we have because that shouldn’t be forced to be changed into what we are firmly against.

Merle

One factor for Merle that is unique is that she has children. Nearly all participants who answered questions about having children and their future, responded that they wanted religion to play some role in their child’s life. This will be discussed further in social support and family section, but it is important to note that the Merle may be more motivated to find an accepting and welcoming church than the majority of participants because of a desire for that community and support for her children. Also part of being selective for Merle deals with the role of the church as a source of socialization. She does not want her children to be socially forced to change their stances on social issues. For Merle herself, the experience goes beyond LGBTQ identity and to other issues of religion and politics becoming intertwined, including women’s rights. While not all participants suggest that politics causes problems in their faith, others did make similar points.

While the vast majority reported that they never experienced any kind of specific or explicit hate from church leaders, or religious community, all reported encountering religion being used to support hate somewhere or at some time during their lives. Many pointed to family, casual interactions or posts on the internet as times they encountered religious rhetoric promoting homophobia. When asked how they deal with these issues all said it depends on the context of the situation. One of the key factors for many is how well they know the person. Most responded that if they felt comfortable with the person and thought he/she would listen, they would engage in thoughtful conversation and respond to the comment. But if they thought that the points would fall on deaf ears, they would let the issue drop. There was no consensus on how to handle situations on the internet. Several posted that they try to stay above the fray unless they are close to the person or are singled out in some way. Others posted that they are more likely to engage with posts on the internet, presumably because there is some social distance. The following post by Persnickety somewhat encapsulates how participants deal with the situation.

Generally, by ignoring it. But if I'm feeling cheeky that day, I'll be an _____ to the individual by showcasing my extensive knowledge of the Bible and the historical context in which most of it was written/translated in. If it is someone who I am close to, they are likely saying it out of ignorance, in which case I will be nice and explain things.

Persnickety

Like Persnickety, the most common response is to ignore the comment, but if the participant decides to engage the tone depends on the person making the comment and her/his tone. For the most part, all of the participants self-describe their knowledge of the Bible and particular verses to be good, at least good enough to take on the typical

religious justifications for homophobia. This confidence is in part due to the fact that the religious arguments against homosexuality are something predictable for the participants.

He picked and chose verses of the Bible to use-ALL Old Testament and ALL those passages that Jesus said were NOT about who His Father was.

Merle

According to participants all arguments that use religion to argue against homosexuality are drawn from the Old Testament. In addition, they point out that generally these passages are taken out of context and are cherry picked. Participants also tended to discuss how they predict these verses and counter accordingly.

I know enough to engage in debate about (the) context in which the bible was written and the different interpretations of the typical quotes verses, i.e. Leviticus, "man shall not lie with man", the story of Lot and Sodom, etc ...

Derktheactore

Participants reported using the same rhetorical strategies: context, translation, and if they still identify as Christian, the larger message of Christianity. Most participants refer to knowing the verse that will be used by their opponent before the Biblical quote is used, and all describe having their "go to" responses to each.

When people use scripture to justify homophobia, I usually reply with scripture against other things, such as shellfish, pork, tattoos, working on the Sabbath, or wearing clothing made from different materials. I also tell them that Christianity should be about love and a personal relationship with God, regardless of how other people view me or my lifestyle.

KweenKerra

For LGBTQ Christians the tone and responses are a little different, but center on the big picture of Christian teachings and lessons.

In any situation, hate speech is not Christ-like. Jesus didn't tell prostitutes to get out of his church because they are going to hell; even if you think homosexuality is a sin, casting them out of church and damning them isn't

what Christ would do. Furthermore, this sort of exclusion contributes to the societal atmosphere that makes suicide rates so high. What would Jesus do? Reach out and love these deeply hurting people, not shame them. Sometimes I say that, of all the things in the Bible, homosexuality is not the most important. So many more things are spoken of more frequently and more directly; focusing on this one detail takes away from so much more that could be done.

Bandnerd218

Several participants discussed how the religious arguments that they often hear ignore the overall messages of love, and acceptance from Christianity. For some this disconnect between talk and action, contributes to their frustration and identity conflict. They discuss how they see a religious community filled with hypocrisy.

I began to wonder about this. How could it be that these people would say- Sunday after Sunday- that ONLY God was able to judge- yet they would follow this up with judgments that hurt the people I loved and the things I believed in. It began to wear me down.

Merle

While not all participants reported that the disconnect between talk and action affected their attendance, involvement, or discussion to leave religion, I do imagine that it was a factor especially for those who only completed the survey but reported that they became agnostic or that they attend a religious service less than 12 times per year. However, several participants who now identify as agnostic or atheist did point to the irrationality of the Divine being a factor.

Future Family and Social Support

Families play an important role in the socialization of children, which includes the development of a moral compass. Many parents use religion to help guide them and their children in the development of this moral compass.

Participants were asked explicitly about family in two posts and one survey question, however family was a sub-question or a topic in five of the posts. The two explicit questions ask about family that participants grew up in (parents, siblings, and extended family), and about marriage and children (this question centered around the ideal or future for many, but for some it dealt with their partner and children). For the most part, nuclear and extended family were discussed in terms of their reaction to participants coming out as LGBTQ. Few talked about their family as being their main source of social support. One theme, however did emerge though it requires further research. There appears to be a correlation between parents' religiosity and their reaction to their child coming out as LGBTQ and participant's resolution strategies. However due to a small sample size it would be irresponsible to draw meaningful conclusions about this trend, and therefore will be discussed further in the future research section found on page 52.

Two participants in particular posted about how the support of others that they knew who were of different faith traditions helped them know it was ok to explore and learn about options.

Growing up my best friend was Jewish, which helped me learn about other religions other than the "one" religion I was raised in.

Emeraldwillow64

For Emeraldwillow64 this early exposure to religious diversity helped her find the courage to explore other denominations and explore what she wanted for herself.

Ashley identified that meeting her bisexual and Pagan Aunt was life changing because up until that point she felt that Christianity was her only option.

At 13, I met my Pagan aunt who is also a bisexual. I was honestly shocked that she was so open about it. By the end of my visit with her, I was nowhere near ready to come out, but I was more comfortable and less disgusted with myself.

Ashley

Prior to this meeting Ashley describes feeling lonely and worried about her sexuality.

When I was 10 years old, I had my first inkling that I might not be straight. I found myself liking girls just as I liked guys and it honestly scared me. I was disgusted with myself, because I knew it was wrong. I didn't dare tell anyone for fear they would treat me as disgusting as I felt. I was raised believing that being in a relationship with someone of the same gender was an abomination. The church told me so and some members of my family told me so. I lived in silent fear for years that someone would find out my secret.

Ashley

Meeting her aunt served as a catalyst for Ashley both in accepting her sexual and agnostic identities. While there were other factors that affected her ability to accept both identities, such as: seeing friends come out, witnessing and experiencing acceptance from friends and parents and exposure to a different religious experiences and perspectives, Ashley identified meeting her aunt as a turning point for her identity.

When it comes to forging new families nearly all participants reported that they had or were planning to have weddings outside of religion. Most participants reported that their relationships were usually with people of the same level of religiosity though sometimes different faith traditions. They all reported that they worked on being tolerant and supportive of the other's religion. Only one participant who completed the survey reported that they were planning a religious wedding to their fiancée. However, when it comes to raising children all participants who responded to the question reported that

they wanted to expose their children to religion but it was up to their child to make the ultimate decision.

When I have children, I would like religion to play a large role in their lives. Church was a huge part of my life growing up, and it's something I would love for them to experience.

Kweenkerra

Kweenkerra points to the positive experiences she had as a result of religious involvement and in her survey suggested that her fiancé had similar desires for their children. Others posts made similar points about the role of relationships on raising children within religion.

I would like to teach my children religion. I would have to look into the religious stuff that they do get - or at least give them a variety of denominations. A lot will be my partner and I talking about things probably. If my partner isn't religious or is of a different religion, I would be willing to compromise and either explain that there are multiple ways to think about religion and allow them to decide or teach customs of both religions, if possible.

Bandnerd218

The desire to raise children in a religious way is not surprising for participants who still identify as Christian. This post also points out the importance of compromise with a partner. There is a desire however to encourage children to develop their own religious identity and to screen what their children are taught. LGBTQ Christian parents are likely to be critical of youth groups, Sunday school, and vacation Bible schools due to their past experiences. They may choose to add to what children learn and be actively involved in guiding children's faith. This desire also exists with the atheist participants as well.

My teenage son has been exposed to religion; we do not attend church. He is certainly allowed to go with friends; he attends events with

them but not church regularly. I do not want to force religion on him, but do not want to force atheism either; this is his decision.

Bob1

Bob1's post fairly perfectly describes the overall position that participants had about children and religion. They want their children to be exposed to and able to participate in religious activities, but they do not push the issue, or plan to make their children attend.

If I were to have kids I would definitely want to educate them about religion, because whether I like it or not it will be something that they will have to confront in their socialization, but I would teach them about religion as a cultural tradition as opposed to a supernatural fact. I would raise them to be critical of religion, and admit that I would probably be disappointed if they turned out to be very religious or religious at all.

Derktheactore

As for children, I will allow my children to explore different ways of being human. I'll not push a single religion on them and encourage them to try out whatever they want. What I will push on them is critical thinking and the ability to realize that reality is subjective by definition (as there is no way for a human to experience reality objectively). The closest thing we have to objectivity is science, and that is what they should understand about the world.

Persnickety

Atheists have a strong desire to expose their children to other religions and perspectives, but also seek to encourage their children to be critical and to recognize the value of rational and scientific thought. This suggests that while religion may not be important to some participants, they feel religion as an institution is important to society and that exposure to it is critical for their children's understanding of their social world.

Coming Out Non-Christian

As previously discussed many of the participants grew up in the south, specifically the Bible Belt, where Christianity is presumed to be the default religion. As a

result, one theme that emerged in the posts was how participants deal with coming out as atheist, agnostic or a religion that is not part of Judeo-Christianity; most notably Pagan.

First it is important to distinguish the differences between agnostic and atheist. Agnosticism is sometimes considered the abandonment or rejection of organized religion; however formal definitions describe agnostic as not knowing if God exists. For participants, frustration with lack of acceptance in most denominations leads to the rejection of organized religion. Atheism is the belief that there is no God. Many Atheists look to science and rational thinking over blind faith in the spiritual (Cline 2015). Atheists, agnostics, and Pagans in my study all experience some levels of distrust or misunderstanding from members of the Christian community.

Atheists in American society are a stigmatized group. Studies have found that people have higher levels of distrust of atheists than other religious groups (Gervais 2011). The following quote describes one participant's experience coming out as gay and as an atheist.

They accepted that I was my own person, but offered me to speak to a priest/preacher. I chose this moment to also come as an atheist. Their response was one part religion and one part worrying for my safety. They worried about how I would be able to get a job and whatnot.

Persnickety

This quote illustrates several aspects of coming out as non-Christian. Just as heteronormativity requires those who are not heterosexual to disclose their feelings, the assumption that one is Christian is a basic assumption in American society, particularly in the Bible belt. This quote also illustrates how parents worry for their children that taking on another stigmatized status will negatively impact their ability to find employment, or increase their chances of experiencing hate in the community. Often like in Persnickety's

post, participants discussed coming out as non-Christian in their stories of coming out as LGBTQ. For some conversations about being LGBTQ was the same one as they discussed not believing in God or organized religion.

For nearly all participants who discussed identifying as agnostic, atheist, or Pagan, there were coming out stories or concerns that overlap or confound the issue of coming out as LGBTQ. Issues of fear of rejection from friends and society, and even the reluctance to accept a non-Christian identity are similar to concerns of accepting a LGBTQ identity.

A part of me was very reluctant to make the change from Christian to Agnostic as Christianity was everything that I knew, even if I never fully believed in it... My parents and sister accept me (even if two of them wishes I would accept God into my heart.)

Ashley

Religious identity is largely a decision which means it is optional. It is an entirely socially created phenomenon that has evolved into an ideology and culture. This makes it uniquely connected to identity and social integration. It makes sense why individuals would be nervous to disclose their lack of belief, because it inherently means entering a different way of thinking and a different way of making meaning and different ways of being connected to humanity. Not only is it an intense psychological exercise, but the social ramifications, range from stigma to rejection from family, a group in our society supposedly based on the idea of unconditional love and support. In this regard Ashley is fortunate to have supportive family members even if they impose their world view at times. Not all participants believed their parents would accept a non-religious identity.

I am not out (as bisexual) to my family. My family is very conservative religiously and as the only atheist in the family, I am already an abomination.

DCB

DCB's post illustrates how connected LGBTQ identity and non-Christian identity can intersect to describe a unique social position. DCB has chosen not to come out to family as bisexual in part due to their religiosity, but primarily because she does not want to add another stigma, especially with her family. Her family already feels a wedge in their relationship because of her atheism, for DCB disclosing sexual identity could mean being completely excluded from the family.

Just as people can choose not to come out as LGBTQ, people can choose not to disclose their non-Christian identity.

I let a good majority of my family believe that I am Christian and I never say otherwise. I can honestly say that I'm scared of being shunned by them. They are all very much Christian and they really don't associate with people of other religions or beliefs.

Ashley

In this post Ashley describes how she uses the assumption of Christianity as default religion to prevent her extended family from excluding her on the basis of her agnostic identity. She also delves into the primary concern of Non-Christians, the fear that they will be excluded from the family, and stigmatized by the family. She also touches on one of the main reasons for intolerance for any community, lack of exposure. While she has been exposed to a family member who is not Christian, she fears of rejection from her family, because they "don't associate with people of other religions or beliefs" making coming out as agnostic an impossibility for the participant. While she does not explicitly say how accepted by her family her aunt is, perhaps witnessing their acceptance or lack

thereof to her aunt is a factor in this decision. While Ashley's strategy may seem like compartmentalizing, it really is more of a selective closeting, because to other groups she is always an agnostic bisexual.

These experiences are not unique to Atheists and agnostics. Misperceptions of Paganism have caused some to be reluctant to disclose their religious/spiritual identity.

I don't talk about it (Paganism) unless I am very, very familiar with the person and know that they won't freak out or treat me like a pariah, so it's more of a very personal thing to me than an external identifying factor.

LouiseMC

LouiseMC's post reveals that the fear of exclusion or rejection can extend beyond family.

LouiseMC reports that she does not come out as Pagan unless she really knows the person and knows that they will not judge her. Many have misconceptions about Paganism, associating it with the devil and witches.

Much like disclosing sexual identity is a necessity for self-acceptance, disclosing religious identity can be an important first step. For some it was the acceptance of a non-Christian identity that allowed them to be open and accept fully their sexual identity.

Once I switched to Agnosticism, I quickly accepted the sexuality I had been trying to lock away and it made me feel so much better. I got the courage to come out to my parents, slowly and over the course of several discussions, and them accepting me was one of the greatest feelings in the world.

Ashley

It wasn't until about senior year of undergrad that I started seriously questioning and critiquing Christianity and later religion in general. I became an agnostic then an atheist in the Summer of 2014 - letting go of religious obsession and becoming a much more free, happy, and politically/socially aware person.

Seige

It is important to reiterate how religion can become as invisible as any ideology or culture, and sometimes it takes extreme mental exercises to break down and re-conceptualize one's own world view. This is especially true where social ramifications are concerned. Abandoning religion sounds easy, but as these participants' coming out stories reveal there is a great deal of self-reflection and lengthy exploration of existing religions that occur first. Participants' tone suggests great relief, and personal enlightenment when they accept their agnostic or atheist identity. This is in part because of a lift in the social pressures to conform, or remain closeted in their sexuality or lack of religion.

Reconciling Faith: The Key is to Individualize

Equally as complicated of a task as abandoning religion is reconciling or integrating sexual identity and religious identity. While it is obviously difficult to deal with homophobia, or an expectation of rejection from the Christian community of LGBTQ individuals, these may not be the only issues that make reconciling difficult. While it might be expected that finding an affirming denomination would illuminate identity conflict, it rarely is a lasting solution, and for some, changing denominations only continues the struggle.

I find myself now closer to God than ever- but it is on MY terms and through Him- only. I do not recognize man-made religions that pick and choose who is a Christian without the person's input (but) based on their demographics and beliefs.

Merle

For Merle, there is not a simple denomination change that will change the underlying issue. The issue seems to be the rhetoric surrounding social issues that are a source of

conflict. Merle was not the only participant to draw on the rhetoric surrounding Christianity in the United States.

Currently there is a perception, especially prevalent in the LGBTQ community, that Christians are hypocrites who use the Bible to defend their own homophobia or bigotry. The use of religion in hateful rhetoric and imposing social policy has created a segment of the population who may identify as non-religious, not because they do not believe in Christian values, in this case, but because the message has been so radicalized that it is difficult to accept Christian as an identity. Still, for those who identify as Christian in the LGBTQ community there may be added pressure to explain why one is a Christian. The following quote from Bandnerd218 illustrates that this perception is still prevalent, and that to overcome, one must develop their own ideology.

I grew up in Tennessee, which is largely Christian. I am Christian as well, however, most of the louder Christian's ideology does not match up with my own. I think the area may have affected the fact that Christianity reached me, but ultimately my spiritual relationship and beliefs are between me and God.

Bandnerd218

The idea of developing an individualized relationship with God, was a common theme among those who maintained a religious identity. For Bandnerd218, the messages of hate or intolerance coming from other Christians made her feel that she had to distinguish her version of Christianity from those of others. In order to maintain a Christian ideology, she had to develop her own relationship with God.

Developing a more individualized faith is challenging. Especially when the church community or the emphasis during service is not affirming for transgender participants, the need for affirming spaces was more apparent. An anonymous post

describes his/her parents' response. They told their child that transgender identity was "spitting in God's face." This sort of reaction can make it difficult to continue to even attempt to have a religious identity. However, as the following post reveals, when individuals find a church that affirms and one focuses on their own interpretation of scripture it is possible to reconcile faith.

I am very much still a trans woman. Just stuck and unable to do anything about it. Since coming out, I was still church-less at the time. I firmly believed and still do believe God does not make mistakes. That means God made me trans* and made me a lesbian for a reason. I am Gods careful design. Then I found an Episcopal Church here and started going with a friend. I love it. It is warm, welcoming, and very accepting and affirming. I have since been trying to reconcile my faith through this church. Its been very good to me and for me so far. I think God was sending me a message by leading me to this church. And that is where I am at now.

For the author of this post finding a denomination with the flexibility to be supportive combined with developing individualized meaning for Christian teachings, has created an environment that the participant wants to be involved and feels safe in doing so.

DISCUSSION

Resolution Strategies

As predicted, all participants followed Levy and Reeves (2011) model for conflict resolution. Few could identify a particular moment when they perceived that there was a conflict, but all experienced a period of secrecy or depression. To some degree the positive or negative catalyst predicts whether a person resolves the conflict by creating a new personalized faith, or by abandoning religion. As I suggested, this stage is a social event involving a social group, for most participants this event was coming out to family.

Based on this response the direction of the investigation can begin. For some this was having conversations or investigations into atheism, or agnosticism, for others this could be attending different churches or religious services. The final step, which is characterized by feeling that the issue is resolved, seems to be on going for many participants, while some suggest that religion is meant to be an ongoing process of self-discovery and new perspectives, sometimes for LGBTQ individuals this process can be derailed by the outspoken nature of some Christians rather than from an internal self-reflection. For very few participants the resolution was the end of their searching or spiritual growing. In fact, the previous definitions of resolution strategies may need further consideration based on the results of this study.

The five resolution strategies are: rejecting their sexual identity, rejecting their Christian identity, integrating the two identities, compartmentalizing, and living with the conflict. For this study I did not seek out any participants who rejected their sexual identity, so this remains a viable option, but based on my findings I do not believe that compartmentalizing and living with the conflict are actual resolution strategies. With that being stated in this study there are really only two outcomes, rejecting the Christian identity, and integrating the two identities.

To some degree I do not think that compartmentalizing or living with the conflict is possible in the real world. While I recognize that a good percentage of my participants only completed the survey and did so in a way that suggests that perhaps they live with the conflict, I would argue that they have not worked their way through all of the steps outlined by Levy and Reeves to have reached a resolution. Many of these participants

acknowledge that they are still evolving their identity or maintain an unspecified spiritual identity. This suggests evolution, and perhaps searching. My research seems to suggest that one develops their own understanding of religion or they abandon religion.

Based on the posts of the participants, the identity conflict and external conflict that arise from these two identities make simply living with it an unsustainable outcome, which means that it must resolve further. The same is true of compartmentalization. It is simply unrealistic for individuals to live with the division. I do think that participants can come out selectively, but so much of religion takes place internally, as an ideology and a practice, that one cannot separate sexual identity and religious identity. I would argue that not coming out to members of a faith community or family, does not constitute compartmentalization. My research does suggest that resolution is an ongoing process and that some participants encounter situations which cause them to pause and re-evaluate their identity more than others. Instead I think compartmentalization, and living with the conflict are coping strategies that are sustainable for a short time, but ultimately have to give way into abandoning or integrating.

Future Research

One area that needs further research is the role of family religion on LGBTQ individuals. Future research should consider using predictive modeling to understand anticipated parental reactions to their child coming out as LGBTQ or to predict an LGBTQ individual's religious identity. It is expected that religion would undoubtedly be one of the main factors in acceptance or rejection of LGBTQ youth. It is expected that families with high religiosity would lead to greater identity conflict or even trauma for

LGBTQ individuals. The individual's religiosity would likely be the best predictor of ultimate religious identity, however, results from this study suggests that the external conflict between family members, also plays an important role in predicting religious identity. This study, however, lacked a large enough sample to fully understand this phenomenon.

In this study, those who identify as atheist or agnostic also reported experiencing or predicted extreme reactions to their sexual identity. Some reported hearing verbal assaults such as “all gays go to hell” from family members. They also reported experiences of family members, who they are intimately related or perhaps dependent on, rejecting their sexual identity or saying these hostile things, which while none reported it as trauma, they abandoned organized religion and belief in God.

For those who had neutral to affirming conversations with family this hostility towards religion is not present. These individuals discuss a desire and a search to learn more about other religious traditions, or denominations. While not all remain religious, they tend to have a more reflective tone in their posts, and seem to continue working through their religious identity in their posts. Many of these participants answered that they are “evolving their religious identity” on their surveys. They also discuss developing new roles and understandings of religion in their lives, such as one participant who described church service as a place to find things to think about or reflect on outside of church rather than a community to develop beliefs or belong.

Both groups describe working through and researching to find an understanding of religion. Families and their attitudes towards LGBTQ identity paired with their

religiosity, could serve to be the best indicator of a person's willingness to research and investigate other faith traditions, or abandoning religion as an institution. What is interesting however, is that family attitudes, for the majority of participants, outweigh church teaching or doctrine including explicit homophobic behavior in the church. For example, one of the participants, KweenKerra, who was asked by her youth group to pass out antigay literature, posts that she is still evolving her religious identity and that work is the biggest factor which prevents her going to church. She also reported that her family is not very religious and that her family is supportive of her sexual identity. This is in stark contrast to Derktheactore and Ashley who reported that their families' wish they would find God again or suggest that God could cure them. Derktheactore identifies as atheist and Ashley as agnostic. These findings, while perhaps not generalizable make a strong case for further research into the family's role in shaping religious identity for LGBTQ after they come out.

LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations to this study, primarily due to the size of the sample and the level of participation. While creating a new website for data collection allows for complete control over content (i.e. eliminates the need to sift through hundreds of forum posts on existing websites for responses pertaining to the topic) it can be difficult to increase foot traffic. While I reached out to several LGBTQ organizations, primarily Tennessee, only MTSU yielded many participants. Using Facebook recruited some participants, but fewer than anticipated. For this research I think the main issue was with the length of the URL and the ability to search on Google. While websites that are used

by millions of people need only a couple of characters to find in a search engine, websites that are developed by individuals using website builders such as Wix, are exceedingly long and difficult to type. In addition, one typo could lead to an error screen instead of the website. These posed real concerns for the research. For example, it effectively limited recruitment to internet spaces, and emails, so that a link could be provided.

The second major limitation deals with participation. I fully anticipated most participants responding to at least one thread on the website, however to increase usable data I built a survey which would encourage detailed responses that could also be data. This worked well, however, some participants only responded to the survey and did not elaborate on their answers in the forum. There are two explanations that could explain why the survey was more likely to be completed. The first is that surveys are a conventional method. People are familiar with how a survey can be used as data, and it is a quick and easy process. The second is one I discovered in attempting to recruit participants. Forums maybe “out of style” or “old fashioned.” With the growth of social media sites like Facebook, and Twitter, perhaps we are entering an era in which even the internet is becoming more isolated and less of a social space. While Facebook and Twitter allow users to post and discuss topics, perhaps more users are interested in their own posts about their daily lives, and funny memes, than starting conversations with friends through messages or on their timeline. Twitter seems even less social, as it is comprised of status updates. In the past there were many forums for LGBTQ youth, such as Girl2Girl all of which featured a forum that discussed everything from coming out to safe sex. When I made an attempt to recruit participants on these sites, I found that most

had either eliminated their forums in favor of resources, or had become dating websites. While the old format allowed users to post questions and responses to other users with just a screen name, the new websites focus on information and providing an entirely LGBTQ space to search for dates. I modeled the website after the old style of forum, and this could have alienated the participants. I noticed that participants who posted in the forum were a little older than those who just completed the survey. The younger participants also made comments that they turned to the internet prior to coming out. Older participants probably remember the era of LGBTQ forums and therefore were comfortable in this anonymous space. Obviously this might be a topic that needs further research, or is already the subject of social science research that is more tech centered.

CONCLUSION

How can LGBTQ people, who have been excluded and persecuted by some Christians, maintain a Christian identity? The answer based on the total responses from participants is that it depends on whether you can: individualize your faith, forgive those who have used the scripture to hurt you personally and politically, or if you can compartmentalize your identities. If none of these options work, it is likely that one would have to abandon religion or ignore the conflict. Each of these is much easier said than done and one thing that is abundantly clear from this study is that LGBTQ individuals must negotiate, and work through some level of identity conflict due to religion. For those who ultimately abandon religion, it is not a decision made lightly.

There is a great deal of thought and reasoning that they must struggle through to arrive at the decision to abandon the idea of God and/or organized religion.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: FORUM SCHEDULE

Week 1

1. To get started please tell everyone a little about yourself.
 Tell us a little about who you are and your religious background.
 What faith tradition did you grow up in? What was your involvement like?
 Have you changed denominations or faiths at any point? What caused you to make this change? What was difficult about that change? What was helpful during that change?

2. It seems like every denomination has a little different way of approaching the issue of same sex relationships. Some are very outspoken and others there is an unspoken understanding.
 When you were growing up what did your church teach about homosexuality? How were you taught this? Have you ever experienced homophobia at church or from the religious community that you belong to?
 For those of you have changed denominations or religions, what do they teach about homosexuality?

3. This post is all about religion in your life right now. Whether you are in the same denomination, changed denominations/religions, abandoned religion, or are still trying to find the right fit or balance for you, this is a space for you to share your experiences and the process of practicing religion the way you do now.
 Do you current practice religion? What religion or denomination do you currently belong to?
 Are you actively involved in a religious community?
 What is your experience like in that community?
 If the religion or denomination differs from one you grew up in how is it different?
 How did you find out about the religion or denomination?
 Some of you many have attended or worked a religious school or other organization at some point or for all of your life. In this post please share what those experiences were like.

Week 2

1. This post is all about coming out, whether to family, friends, classmates, or co-workers, coming out can sometimes be tricky situation.
 Do you think knowing the other person's religion makes a difference when or if you come out to them? Do you come out differently to someone that you know is really religious compared to someone you know is not religious?
 When coming out to someone, do you ever worry about their response because of their religion?

If you are out to your parents, what was their reaction when you came out? Do you think that their religion played a role in this response? If you are not out to your parents, does religion play a part in that decision? Is something else a factor such as political affiliation?

Did you ever come out to members of your religious community?

What are some tips or strategies that you have found helpful when coming out?

2. Unfortunately, sometimes scripture and church teachings are used to justify homophobic and hate speech.

How do you handle situations when religion is used to attack LGBTQ people?

If you confront individuals when they make these statements, what do you say?

Do you respond differently if the person is someone you are close to?

What if it happens online?

If you still identify as Christian, how does that effect how you handle these situations?

3. Tell us a little about your family, friends, and relationships.

How religious are they? How did they respond to you when you came out? Has coming out changed your family dynamic? When you are in a relationship, what role does religion play? Has religion ever been a part of your relationships? Do you ever go to church services or mass with your partner? What role do you think religion should play in your relationships?

Week 3

1. As marriage equality advances in many states, do you think that churches will be next?

Ideally, do you think that religion will be a part of your wedding ceremony?

If you plan to have children, what role do you want religion to play in their lives?

2. Have you ever attended a religious school? What was your experience like while you were there?

Have you ever worked for a religious school? What was that experience like?

3. Ideally, what role would you like religion to play in your life? If it is different from the role it plays now, what are some ways that you work on improving or changing this?

APPENDIX B: ONLINE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Please take 5-10 minutes to fill out the following demographic survey. This will be used by the researcher and will not appear to the members of the website. The information you provide on this survey will remain confidential. For each question you are able to check all that apply and define your own response if you would like to do so.

Screen Name:

Email Address:

County:

State:

Current State (If not Tennessee):

How long did your/How long have you lived in Tennessee:

Sex:

Gender:

Age:

Sexual Identity

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Transsexual
- _____

Race/Ethnicity

Check all that apply

- White
- Black/African American
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- Asian
- Latino/Hispanic
- Middle Eastern/Arab

Highest Education Level

- Some High School
- High School Graduate
- Some College
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Some Post Graduate
- Master's Degree
- PhD.
- PhD.+

Religious Affiliation

List each religion or Christian denomination you have been involved in. About how old were you when you attended each of the churches? How involved were you in that church (How often did you go to church? Did you participate in extra activities such as Bible study, youth group, Sunday school, etc? Were you Baptized, attend a private school etc.)?

If you currently practice or identify with a denomination or religion please list it below.

Do you attend a religious group regularly? If yes how often?

- Several times a week
- Once a week
- A few times a month
- Occasionally
- Never
- I do not identify with a religion
- I do not practice a religion

How would you say you identify with religion?

- Atheist
- Agnostic
- Spiritual
- I identify as religious, but currently do not practice
- Religion was very important to me in the past, but not anymore
- Religion is somewhat important to me
- Religion is very important to me
- I am evolving in my religious identity
- _____

Is religion important to your family?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- A little important
- Not important at all

Relationship Status

- Single
- In a committed relationship
- Engaged
- Living with partner
- Married

*Why do you need to know? There are some questions that relate to the role of religion in relationships, marriages, and how partners create and negotiate religion together. For this reason it would be helpful to know if you are currently in a relationship.

What role does religion play in your relationships?

How did you find out about this research project?

- A friend
- Facebook
- College Email

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARD

Before you can begin commenting, and posting in the forum it is important that you are aware of the nature of this research, and your rights as a participant. This webpage will be used for data collection for a master's thesis. All posts and messages will be used as data. The resulting research may be published in an academic journal. All of your comments and posts will be public to those who are registered members of the website. If you would like your responses to be more confidential you may send private messages to the researcher or take part in a face to face interview. All posts will be presented in the research without identifying features and with pseudonyms. You are able to discontinue your participation at any time, however be aware that any posts, comments, or messages you make during your participation will be included in the research data unless a written request is provided to the researcher. This means that if you post it, it is data. If you decide that you do not want a post reported in the research, you must email the researcher with the specific post you want excluded.

Consent Form for Online Discussion Boards and Focus Group Participation

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Lauren Cummerlander from Middle Tennessee State University. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about religious identity in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual community.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty, however any post that I make will be included as data, unless I contact the researcher.
2. If I feel uncomfortable by any of the questions or posts, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to discontinue my participation. I also am able to report my discomfort to the researcher through a private message.
3. The webpage will be active for the months of January and February. After that point the webpage will be no longer be active and my posts will no longer be available online. There are no costs to participation in this study.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name, screen name, or email, in any reports using information obtained from this webpage. I understand that other members of the webpage will have access only to the information I provide in my public posts. If I want more confidentiality I am able to send private messages to the researcher or take part in an interview. I should use caution when posting, as I would on any other website.

5. I understand that some of the questions may result in discomfort due to the deeply personal and sometimes painful memories associated with my sexual orientation and religious identity.
6. This study will be helpful to adding to body of knowledge on religious identity, especially by those who may have been harmed by religious ideology. This study could give those in leadership positions in religious institutions information about how those within the LGBTQ community understand and express religious identity which may make the overall religious community more understanding and tolerant of the LGBTQ community.
7. I can offer any feedback I feel is necessary to the researcher.
8. If you should have any questions about this research study or possible injury, please feel free to contact Lauren Cummerlander at 614-315-7537 or christianandLGBTQ@gmail.com or my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Eller.
9. Confidentiality. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with MTSU or the government, such as the Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board, Federal Government Office for Human Research Protections, if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. 11/11/16 Protocol ID: 15-322
10. **STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY** I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me verbally. I understand each part of the document, all my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study.

APPENDIX D: FIGURE 1A

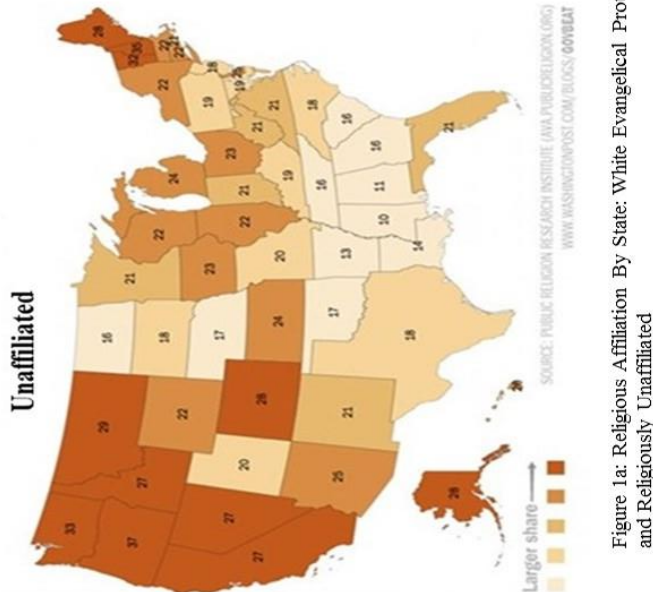
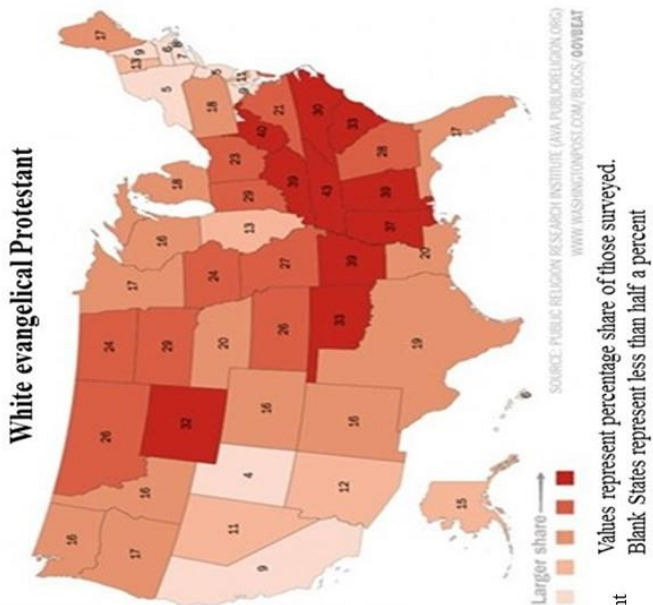
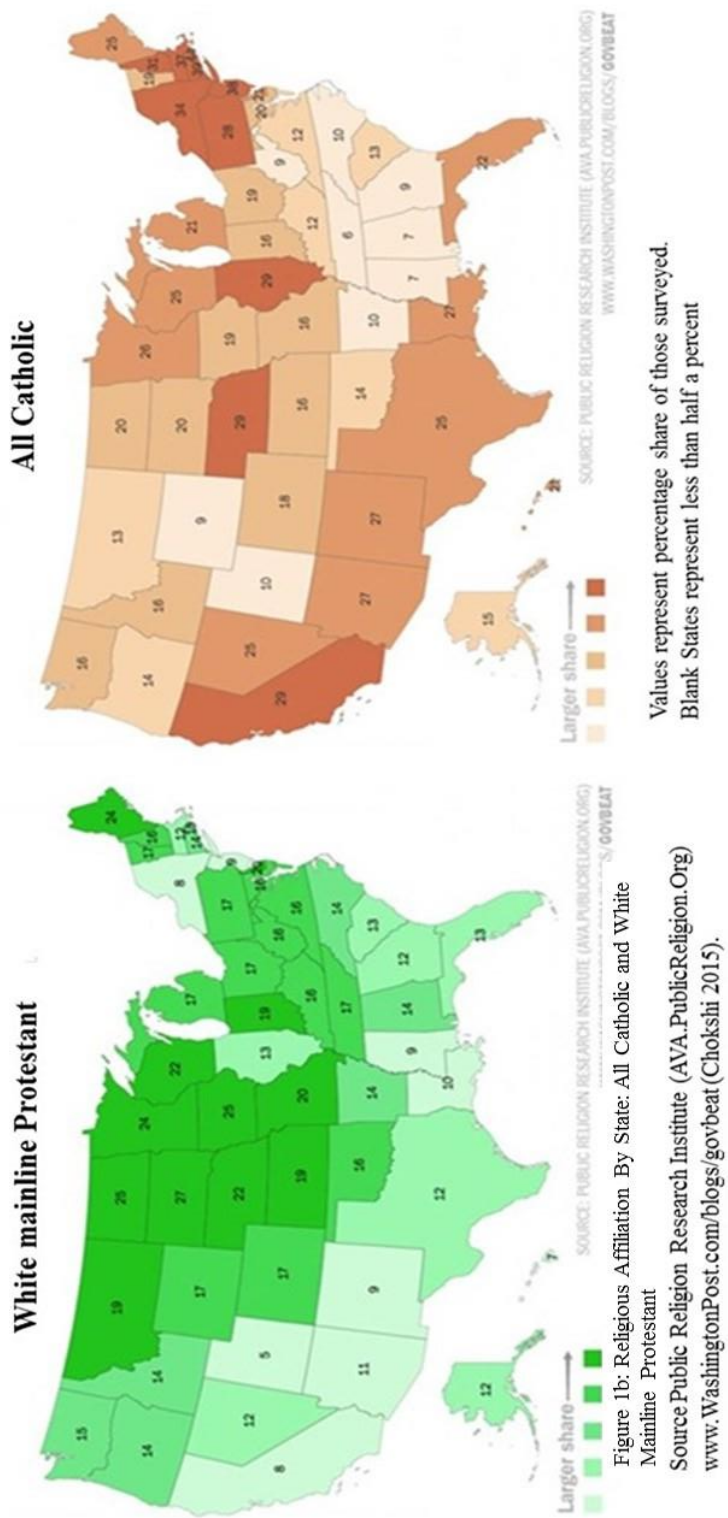


Figure 1a: Religious Affiliation By State: White Evangelical Protestant and Religiously Unaffiliated
Source Public Religion Research Institute (AVA.PublicReligion.Org)
www.WashingtonPost.com/blogs/govbeat (Chokshi 2015).

APPENDIX E: FIGURE 1B



APPENDIX F: FIGURE 2

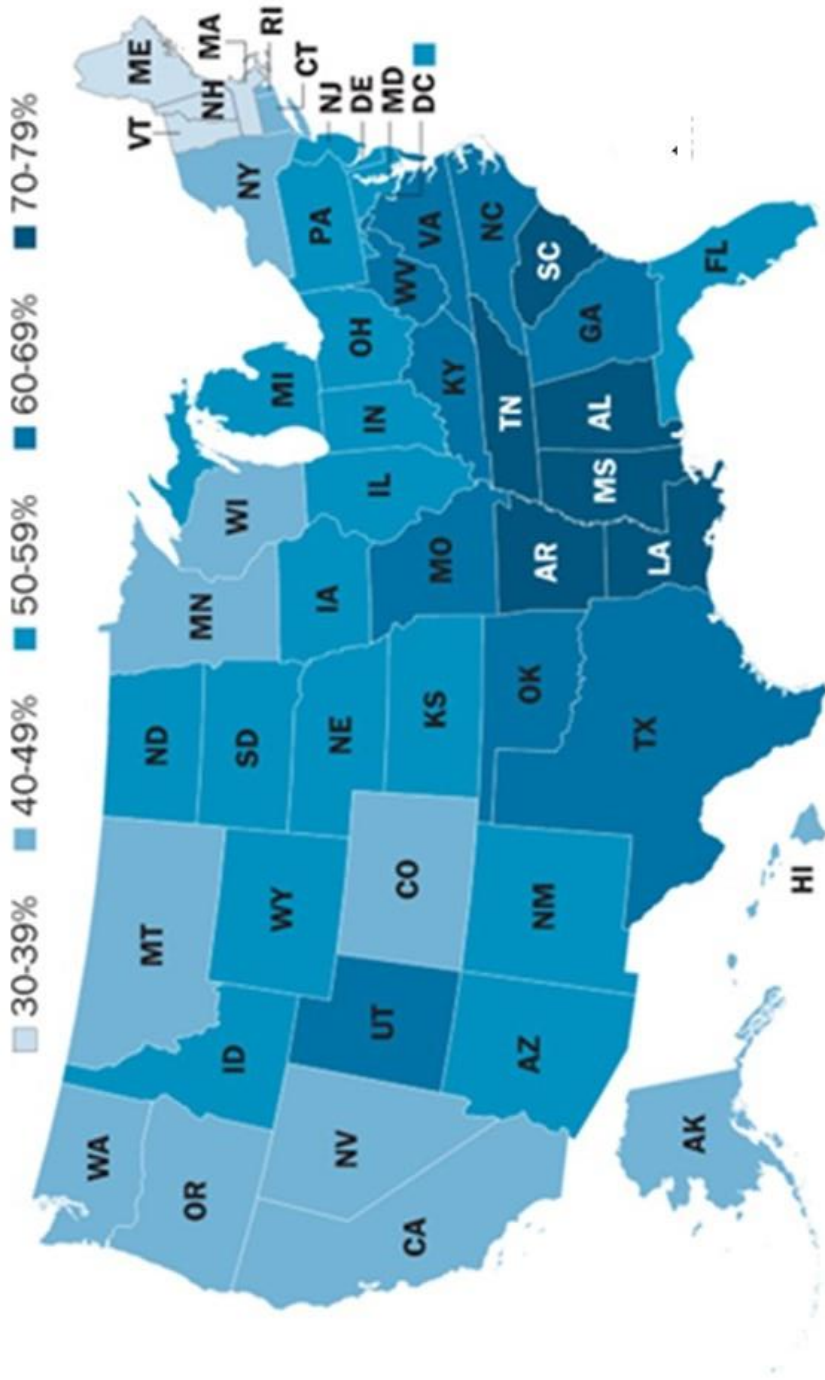


Figure 2: Overall Religiosity by State Percentage of Adults Who Are “Highly Religious”
Source: Pew Research Center “How Religious Is Your State” (Lipka, Wormald 2016).