Religion, spirituality and LGBTQ identity integration

Abstract

Processes of navigating intersections between spiritual/religious identity and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) identity are just beginning to be explicated. In-depth interviews with 35 LGBTQ adults from a range of backgrounds explore experiences with both religion and spirituality. While not all participants experienced conflicts, the psychological and emotional harms done to some participants through organized religion were extensive, and knew no age boundaries. Disembodiment and delayed sexual activity were common. Many left formal religions; those who stayed drew crucial distinctions between religious teachings and institutions, and between religion and spirituality. Heightened knowledge of theology proved helpful to some.

Introduction

Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and those who identify as queer (LGBTQ) almost inevitably have a conflicted relationship to religion and spirituality. Condemnation by mainstream faith traditions has inflicted considerable harm on sexual and gender minorities. The purpose of this study was to explore how a range of LGBTQ individuals experienced and perceived religion and spirituality. In particular, it was to examine identity conflicts, how people sought to resolve conflicts, and how they experienced the place of spirituality and religion in LGBTQ communities. The results may alert counselors to critical factors at both individual and community levels.

Literature Review

The place of LGBTQ in mainstream religions

Religion and spirituality are fraught with tension for many LGBTQ people, as most mainstream religions denounce variance in sexual orientation and gender identity to some degree (Yip,

2005). While not all LGBTQ people involved with organized religions experience identity conflict (Murr, 2013; Rodriguez, 2009; Subhi & Geelan, 2012), many do. As Barton (2010) suggests, "The stakes are high when even one's thoughts threaten one's eternal soul. Fear of hell is a powerful motivator. ... it terrifies young people who cannot control for whom they feel a romantic and sexual attraction" (p. 471).

A growing body of research has documented the often-intense identity conflicts experienced by LGBQ Christians (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; García, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Murr, 2013; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Rodriguez, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Far less research has been conducted with transgender Christians. There are fewer explicitly intolerant messages in scriptures concerning gender identity than sexual orientation, though more conservative Christian faiths proscribe rigid gender roles, leaving congregants unclear where gender variance fits in (Kidd & Witten, 2008; Levy & Lo, 2013; Westerfield, 2012). Perhaps because of this ambiguity, there are indications that transgender people may be more involved with religiosity than are gays and lesbians (Frederiksen-Goldsen, 2011). Nonetheless, many experience intolerance and hostility, and some have been asked not to disclose their transgender identity and/or to leave their churches (Levy & Lo, 2013; Westerfield, 2012; Yarhouse, 2012). Like the rest of the LGBQ population, they are less likely to be involved with organized religion than the general population (Porter, Ronneberg & Witten, 2013).

Research is also scarce concerning LGBTQ people in faith traditions other than Christianity, though there is some suggestion that Judaism, Native spirituality, Buddhism, and Hinduism are more welcoming (Porter et al., 2013; Schnoor, 2006; Westerfield, 2012). There is some debate about the extent to which Islam condemns male homosexuality, though culturally

and legally it is highly intolerant (Jaspal, 2012; Siraj, 2011). It is virtually silent on lesbianism (Siraj, 2011). Culturally, however, as Siraj concludes, "the general perspective of traditional and orthodox religion is that being Muslim and being lesbian are mutually exclusive categories" (2011: 102). The small amount of research evidence available indicates Muslim LGBTQ people experience tremendous identity conflict stemming from both religious and cultural condemnation (Jaspal, 2012; Siraj, 2012). Jaspal (2012) suggests that while Sikh and Hindu religions do not explicitly forbid homosexuality, ethno-cultural norms (which are intertwined with religion) do. In his study of gay Indian men in Britain, Sikh and Hindu participants were less concerned about sin than Muslim men, and more concerned about loss of family and community.

Judaism is religion and ethnicity, and acceptance of homosexuality within the religion varies from intolerance in Orthodox Judaism to widespread acceptance in Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism (Abes, 2011). In one study with lesbian and bisexual women, all of the participants' synagogues had been at least somewhat open to LGBTQ members, and several had had supportive rabbis (Barrow & Kuvalanka, 2011). Nonetheless, Schnoor's (2006) study with Jewish gay men in Toronto found they all engaged in some struggle to integrate gay and Jewish identities.

Psychological and emotional consequences for LGBTQ people

There is now compelling evidence that conflict between sexual or gender identity and religious teachings can significantly damage the well-being of LGBTQ individuals (e.g., Barton, 2010; Bowers, Minichiello, & Plummer, 2010; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; García et al., 2008; Hattie & Beagan, 2013; Lease, Horne & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Rodriguez, 2009; Schnoor, 2006; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Super and Jacobson (2011) note that while affirming religions or congregations, those that welcome

LGBTQ members, may aid in the integration of spiritual and sexual/gender identities, those that are non-affirming and condemning may cause much distress. They argue that this extends as far as "religious abuse," using the power of position and teachings to oppress, coerce and manipulate LGBTQ people through shaming, stigmatizing, rejecting, ousting, exorcising and ex-communicating them (Super & Jacobson, 2011). Barton (2010) reports that simply living in a 'Bible belt' region of the U.S. was described by gays and lesbians as a "spirit-crushing experience of isolation, abuse, and self-loathing" (p. 477).

Depending on degree of welcome or intolerance, LGBTQ people may be harmed emotionally, mentally and spiritually, either within a religion or in choosing (or being forced) to leave a religion (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). Christians and Muslims, at least, often struggle with confusion, low self-esteem, guilt, shame, isolation, hopelessness, depression, anxiety, fear of damnation, feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, suicidal ideation (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; García et al., 2008; Jaspal, 2012; Rodriguez, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Siraj, 2012; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011). This litany of harms appears to include transgender people, at least in Christian traditions (Yarhouse, 2012; Westerfield, 2012).

Evidence concerning psychological well-being is mixed. Clearly gays and lesbians affiliated with non-affirming Christian traditions develop greater internalized homophobia and lower self-esteem (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Bowers et al., 2010), yet it is not clear that those are accompanied by poorer psychological well-being or greater depression (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). Affiliation with affirming religions seems to benefit psychological health, self-esteem and spirituality, for LGBQ and transgender people (Lease et al., 2005; Rodriguez, Lytle & Vaughan, 2013; Yarhouse, 2012). Variations in degree of psychological harm may be mediated by degree of identity integration (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). In terms positive effects, Yarhouse (2012)

found some transgender Christians strengthened their relationships with God through coming to terms with their gender identities. Dahl and Galliher (2012) found LGBTQ young adults who had been raised Christian experienced an increased acceptance of self and others as a result of negotiating their sense of identity within a conflicting religious context. In another study, lesbians and bisexual women reported their faith and spirituality were strengthened through the process of leaving a religion (Murr, 2013).

Staying, leaving and integrating

Several studies have found similar patterns in how LGBTQ individuals respond to conflict with their religious traditions. In their study of gay and lesbian Christians, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) identified four general pathways: rejecting the gay identity, rejecting the religious identity, compartmentalizing the gay self and religious self, or identity integration. García and colleagues (2008) found similar patterns in their study with Latino gay men, as did Ganzevoort and colleagues (2011) with young gay and lesbian Christians in the Netherlands. Schnoor (2006) identified almost identical pathways in his study with Jewish gay men in Toronto. Such pathways are less clear for transgender people, but there is evidence that they disproportionately change faith traditions, leave organized religions altogether, or try out new faith traditions and spiritual paths (Kidd & Witten, 2008; Levy & Lo, 2013; Porter et al., 2011).

Some research has explored the processes through which LGBTQ people may seek to integrate their identities. For some this means changing religions, reducing participation, or changing denominations or congregations within a religion, but it can also mean altering beliefs or relationship to beliefs (Brennan-Ing et al., 2013; Dahl & Galliher, 2012; García et al., 2008; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Some identify a gap between spirituality and religion, seeing the latter as mired in people, politics and fallibility; some deepen their knowledge of spiritual teachings or

theology, identifying where religious doctrines may deviate from their reading of spiritual

teachings; some alter their focus to the core spiritual values of their faith tradition, such as love,

compassion and respect. Such processes have been identified for transgender people (Levy & Lo,

2013; Westerfield, 2012) as well as LGBQ, and for Jews (Barrow & Kuvalanka, 2011; Schnoor,

2006) and Muslims (Siraj, 2012) as well as Christians (Barton, 2010; Brennan-Ing et al., 2013;

Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Murr, 2013; Schuck & Liddle, 2001).

For counselors working with LGBTQ clients, obviously acknowledging that religion may

have left lasting scars is critical, though it is important not to assume conflict (Rodriguez, 2009).

Kocet, Sanabria and Smith (2011) suggest a framework for counselors: understand the relevance

of religion and spirituality to the LGBTQ client, explore related unresolved feelings, help clients

identify the relationship they want (if any) to spirituality and organized religion, and help clients

connect with resources in LGBTQ and faith communities. Bozard and Sanders (2011) have put

forward a model for use with LGB clients who want to explore religious forms of spiritual

engagement, the GRACE model (Goals, Renewal, Action, Connection, Empowerment).

Counselors may help clients identify their goals concerning religion and spirituality, find

renewed hope in spiritual engagement, determine action such as altering relationship to an

existing faith tradition or trying a new one, facilitate a different connection with the divine

and/or with community, and promote empowerment as clients navigate identity integration.

Current Study

In this qualitative study we explore relationships to spirituality and religion among LGBTQ

people of varying gender identities and sexual orientations as well as current and past affiliations

to faith traditions. We examine not only past experiences with religion and spirituality, and

current beliefs and desires, but also perceptions of the place of religion and spirituality in LGBTQ communities.

Methods

Approved by the university Research Ethics Board, this study used interpretive description, a qualitative methodology designed to explore direct experiences analyzed through an interpretive lens informed by theory (Thorne, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were used to discuss with participants both their experiences of religion and spirituality, and the meanings those hold for them. Participants were recruited through notices posted on LGBTQ websites and Facebook pages, in bars and community sites, as well as distributing ads through email networks. The response was overwhelming, and recruitment had to be halted at 35 people. Maximum diversity was sought, in sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ethnicity, relationship to organized religion when growing up, and current spiritual affiliation. Recruitment was intensified as needed to fill gaps in diversity. For example, when few Buddhists were volunteering, ads were sent to LGBTQ Buddhist contacts to forward.

Following discussion of informed consent, each person participated in an audio-recorded interview that lasted 1 to 3 hours. Interviews asked about LGBTQ identity, and processes of disclosure to self and others; religion and spirituality while growing up; changes over time in LGBTQ identity and in religious/spiritual beliefs and practices; and integration of LGBTQ self and spiritual self, personally and in the broader LGBTQ community. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and coded using AtlasTi. Codes were developed through regular team discussions to interpret segments of transcripts. Analysis drew on coded data, but also returned to raw transcripts repeatedly, reading and re-reading, comparing across individuals, and exploring potential patterns by demographic differences (Boyatzis, 1998). As a form of member-checking,

a descriptive summary report was sent to all participants for feedback, and results were presented at 2 community workshops attended by LGBTQ community members. Responses indicated that preliminary analyses resonated.

Participants

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 68, with 11 in the 20-30 age group, 13 in the 31-50 age group and 11 in the 51+ age group. (See Table 1). About ⅔ were Caucasian, which is somewhat less than the population of the region. Participants included 19 women, 11 men, 4 transgender or gender queer, and 1 other gender; 21 identified as gay or lesbian, 4 as bisexual, 7 as queer, 1 as heterosexual and 2 as other. Five were raised in Jewish traditions, one was raised with no faith tradition, the rest grew up in Christian traditions with varying degrees of intensity. Four had studied theology or divinity in different Christian traditions. The participants included clergy as well as deacons and church elders. Pseudonyms were given to all participants, to protect confidentiality.

Among the Christian participants, we have categorized people as having been raised 'intensely' or 'somewhat' Christian (See Table 2). This is a distinction we have imposed, not their words. The 12 participants we consider raised 'somewhat' Christian grew up with organized religion, may or may not have attended church regularly, were not very involved beyond that, and typically did not have much (if any) discussion of religion at home. They were raised in Catholic, Anglican, Salvation Army, and a few mixed faith traditions. The 18 participants we categorize as raised 'intensely' Christian mostly grew up in Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic and Pentecostal/ fundamentalist/ evangelical faith traditions. Two were raised in the United Church. All of these participants were heavily involved in church, usually in youth groups, choir, Bible study. They led church camps, were altar boys, became church elders or

deacons, studied theology, worked for their churches. Religion was usually talked about at home, and often was central to family, schooling and community.

Results

The theme that dominated interviews concerns the ways faith traditions negatively affected LGBTQ people, including shame, guilt, sex negativity, disconnection from body, and severing of relationships to self and others. A second major theme concerns how people resolved any conflicts between their LGBTQ identities and their religious or spiritual beliefs. A final theme concerns the relationships between spirituality and LGBTQ communities.

There were no age patterns in our interviews. Stories of harms done through faith traditions were as intense for those in their 20s as those in their 50s and 60s. A few of the younger participants were raised in relatively tolerant faith traditions and actually sought out more conservative groups, usually seeking a place of belonging, or emotional intensity.

Conflicts between LGBTQ identities and religion /spirituality

The five participants who were raised Jewish (Conservative and Reform) did not appear to have internal conflicts in coming to terms with LGBTQ identities. Some were raised in secular families and experienced Judaism as connection with a people more than religion (c.f. Abes, 2011). For some, however, Judaism provided direction for living a moral and ethical life, at both individual and community levels.

> Judaism was very much my moral compass; like, it was very much rooted in how to
> be a better person. … It's such a huge part of who I am, and how I see the world
> and how I navigate the world and my relationship to everything from food to money
> to sex and gender. (Deborah, queer woman, 26)

None of the Jewish participants experienced religious or spiritual shame in relation to being LGBTQ. Some had heard no teachings about homosexuality while growing up, one suggested that while Jewish teachings assumed heterosexuality, they were not overtly homophobic. One woman had only encountered rabbis who were strongly supportive of LGBTQ rights.

In general, the non-Christian participants did not experience internal conflict, guilt or shame. This may be because they were not exposed to teachings about sin and evil, but it may also be because three of them (two Jewish, one atheist) identified as transgender. Two other participants who identified as transgender or gender fluid, who were raised Christian, also experienced little or no conflict between religious beliefs and gender identity. It is possible that the messages they heard from organized religions concerning gender identity were less explicitly intolerant than the messages about sexual orientation (c.f. Levy & Lo, 2013).

For 18 of the 29 participants who were raised Christian, internal conflicts had been intense. Two of these were raised 'somewhat' Christian, 16 were raised intensely Christian. Several people described pervasive shame as they struggled to come to terms with their sexual orientation. For example, Natasha (raised Catholic) said, "I didn't have barriers of guilt regarding what God specifically would think. But I did have the internalized shame associated with sexuality that just gets conditioned into you, if you're part of the church from a very young age." (bisexual woman, 20). Also raised Catholic, Sam (gay man, 48) learned to see same-sex desire as "something dirty, to be ashamed of, to be hidden." With prevalent messages about gay people being "child molesters," he feared becoming "a monster."

Participants from evangelical churches and some Catholics struggled with the belief that their sexual orientation meant they were sinners and would go to hell. Deirdre, for example, had left an evangelical church in her early 20s, racked with guilt while coming out as lesbian. At age

27, she was still somewhat afraid: "Part of me is a little scared, I guess. Like, you get taught if you don't follow this path of righteousness, you're going to hell." Similarly, Melanie had left her evangelical Christian church in high school, "But I still believed a lot of that stuff. Or feared that that was the way it was; that there was some horrible deity that was watching, and just waiting for an opportunity to land on you like a ton of bricks" (bisexual woman, 56).

Beyond negative messages about LGBTQ people, several participants had experienced church teachings as more broadly sex-negative. In his Wesleyan family, Daniel said, "We could watch a little bit of television, and if there was any reference made to sexuality, (gasps), you know, 'Isn't that awful? Isn't that disgraceful? Isn't that disgusting?'" (gay man, 48). Raised Catholic, Jardine said, "Conversations about sexuality and sex and homosexuality were always very negative. And more than homophobia, ... what I think was more problematic for me was the intensely sex-negative attitude" (queer woman, 26). Several participants said the construction of even masturbation as sinful left them feeling sex in general was shameful, and same-sex attraction doubly so. As Melanie said, "Sexuality itself was so shameful that homosexuality was just, it was beyond shameful. It was literally unspeakable" (bisexual woman, 56).

Delayed sexual activity

Not surprisingly, given the sex-negative and homo-negative messages, many participants delayed sexual activity till relatively late in life. They simply avoided sex. Natasha said all her teen peers were sexually active, but she could not engage: "So much of it was just this internalized shame that was associated with having sex." When she did have sex with a male partner she experienced tremendous self-loathing.

It just all compounded to the point where I felt disgusted with myself, for being

sexual. I felt disgusted by the idea of being sexual with somebody, even if I knew

that that person loved me, I still felt really weird and just wrong, thinking about

having sex with someone. (bisexual woman, 20)

Similarly, Kyle (raised Presbyterian) avoided sex until he was well into his 20's, yet in his first sexual relationship a lot of early messages arose:

It started bringing up things like, no sex before marriage and things like that. They

were still really ingrained in me. And really came to the forefront sometimes, when I

least expected it, something would kind of come out. And I would be like, 'Why do

I still think that?' (gay man, 29)

Other participants, too, found initial sexual intimacy with a partner frightening and challenging, as they battled guilt and shame.

Sam said in his Catholic upbringing "sex was essentially viewed as a necessary evil." As a result he was distanced from his physical self, with "hangups about sexuality, in general, not just being gay in particular, and about my body" (gay man, 48). Similarly, Beth described herself as having been "a disembodied head" for decades. It was only in her 40s, more than 20 years after coming out, that she began to integrate her body into her sexuality: "First time I've ever really gotten into sex toys, or understood lesbian sex completely" (lesbian woman, 47). Amani had been raised in a culture where girls holding hands was very common. Yet she always avoided touching friends, fearing her body might betray her and someone would realize she was attracted to girls: "What if you think I like you in a way that I shouldn't?" (bisexual woman, 28)

Separation from the body and delaying sexual activity allowed participants to come to terms with identity apart from feelings and beliefs about sex. As Kyle said, throughout his teens and into his 20s, sexuality was "on the back burner": "I wasn't seeking a relationship with anyone. I wasn't engaging in sexual behaviour and things like that. I was very much kind of a, a

neutral body, I guess" (gay man, 29). Dierdre used almost the same language, describing herself as putting sexuality on the "back burner... didn't even think about it... never dated until I was twenty two" (lesbian woman, 27). She experienced herself as devoid of sexual desire.

Denial of the self

In addition to the ways some participants put their sexual selves and exploration of their bodies on hold, some denied or separated from whole aspects of themselves. Raised Catholic, Lee-Anne disavowed her bisexuality for many years: "I could somewhat hide behind the fact that I was still attracted to men... I never really mentioned that other part of myself, which was difficult because it was just– I really denied a part of who I was" (bisexual woman, 33). Twenty years later, she has never disclosed to her family or friends in her hometown. She experienced her sexuality and her religion as totally separate: "I tried never to think about it. And it was just, it was almost that there was a separation between those. There was the two—" Dierdre had stopped praying or talking to God when she came out, "because the two together, being gay and being Christian, they had no connection" (lesbian woman, 27).

Ross was raised in a "very Catholic" family, and early on, "I decided I wanted to be worthwhile and successful, and I just went, 'So I'm not going to be gay.'" He denied his feelings for men for about 30 years. Beth came out as lesbian in her 20s, but felt highly separated internally for many years: "It took me a long time to fully be myself. I think I tried to pass as not a lesbian in a lot of situations, for most of my life, until the last couple years" (lesbian woman, 47). She was quite judgmental of others who looked "too" gay. Will was very sexually active as an adolescent, but still kept his Christian and gay selves separate:

> I used to have to segregate it in my body, in my mind. It'd be like, 'Okay, with my
> gay friends, I do gay things. And we talk about gay things. And with my Christian

friends, we talk about Christian things and Biblical things and conservative things.

And if I'm with people I'm having sex with, then it's just sex.' ... Segregation makes

a person crazy. (gay man, 30)

Not only did participants deny or separate from parts of themselves, but some turned to their faith to banish unwanted desires. A deacon and elder in an evangelical church, Peter saw his same-sex attractions and occasional encounters as shameful, and prayed for redemption: "There wouldn't be a day that I wouldn't pray to God that that desire would be taken away. ... It drove me nuts" (gay man, 59). In his 20s his minister directed him to a Christian program aimed at healing sexual and relational 'brokenness.'

He put me on this Living Waters program, and all I would do is listen to the tapes

and hear a voice that was so distinctively gay confessing that he was healed and he

was all better (laugh). ...Well, I fantasized what he looked like! (laugh) Honestly, the

more intense the procedures to deny it, the more real it became.

Two other participants also engaged in church-based programs to try to exorcise their demons. Others willingly or unwillingly had congregations pray over them to heal their sexuality. One young man was told to leave when he refused; he did leave, but he also went back in the closet. Another young man was forced to attend a residential program thousands of miles for 'conversion therapy'. He left after 7 months. When he made his way home again, church leaders told him there was no place for him in the church.

Losses: community, friends, family

Those who were asked to leave a church because they were LGBTQ generally experienced profound loss. Often the church was their entire social network, encompassing family, friends community. Those who were highly active in their faith tradition – clergy, secretary, outreach

worker, youth group leader, choir, deacon, elder – lost those organizational roles when they came out (or were outed). Even those who gradually left their faith tradition lost friends and community, and sometimes family. All but two of those raised 'intensely' Christian described such losses, and those women had already left family and community for other reasons.

Some mourned the loss of a relationship with God. Some mourned the loss of church community. As Jennifer said,

> What I haven't been able to pick up – and perhaps I haven't gone looking hard
> enough yet – is that sense of community. When you're no longer part of an active
> worshipping congregation, where you're with a set group of people, ... where does
> the Christian community come? I haven't figured that one out yet. It's a little
> isolating. (lesbian woman, 35)

When Kyle was confronted by his pastor and asked to leave his church, he felt totally abandoned by the loss of community:

> I'd never felt so alone in my life, and I'd never felt so unsupported in my life, once I
> started coming out and once I was confronted. … I lost a lot, when I needed them
> the most… It really felt like my heart broke, because there was nothing there... I
> think that I still haven't gotten over the break up. (gay man, 29)

After leaving her evangelical church in her early 20s, Dierdre hadn't found anything to replace the sense of intense connection: "I miss the community. And that passion that comes along with that belief system." She went on to say, "all through growing up and through Bible college, you develop this emotional closeness to the people that you're spending time with. Especially at Bible college. We were like a family" (lesbian woman, 27).

Peter and his wife were both heavily involved in their Pentecostal church: "Really, our community didn't expand outside of the church. Our friends would have all been in the church." When Daniel left an intense Christian community, in his 40s, he experienced deep loneliness with the loss of church community: "The depth and the profound despair that there was for me, of being alone and just not knowing how to make my way in the world. The loneliness was— As we talk— I forgot about how lonely it was."

Clare, raised Catholic, named the loss of her faith tradition as loss of connection to ritual, which she had not managed to replace: "There's a lot of comfort in the familiar, and ritual around a very dogmatic approach to religion can be very comforting and very anchoring in times of uncertainty" (lesbian woman, 51). Clare worried about how to raise her children with a sense of moral values in the absence of a faith tradition, the only way familiar to her.

Loss of family connections was even more common than loss of church community. Some simply grew steadily more distant from family, especially if they were out with friends but not with family. Even those who maintained good relationships with family had to find ways to navigate beliefs carefully. Sarah, for example, was close with her family in part because she had moved away: "The way I chose to continue my life was leave. I left my community that I grew up in. I left, essentially, my family. And I didn't think of it as a loss then." The physical distance was becoming harder as her parents aged, and she still had to navigate their belief that she would burn in hell.

Marie left home the night she came out to her parents at age 18, because her parents were so upset. For several years she made attempts to heal relations with her father, but it took about 15 years and a direct confrontation to heal the divide (lesbian woman, 47). Similarly, Beth – the daughter of a minister – lost connection with her parents for all of her early adulthood:

I lost years of a good relationship with my parents. It took a long, long time. ...

That's definitely a huge loss: fifteen years of a good relationship with my parents.

… My father has been horrible to me, horrible... It was pretty devastating. (voice

breaks) ... I never have been able to really talk about my life with them. (lesbian

woman, 47)

Clare had also lost over 15 years of connection with her parents. She delayed coming out to them

till her early 30s, "because I knew I could lose all of them." She started reconnecting with

siblings in her mid-40s, and with her parents at age 49. They missed huge parts of her life during

that time:

I fell in love. I bought my first home. I got married. I had two kids. [I: And your

parents were not there for any of it?] None of it, no. No. None of it. Yeah. ... it's

very sad. And the absence is very profound. ... Then it becomes normal. And you get

used to it. (lesbian woman, 51)

When Ross's Catholic mother found about he was gay she suggested suicide would have been a

better option for him. They were estranged for several years afterward.

Negative effects on emotional well-being

Several participants described detrimental effects on their self-esteem from persistent

condemnatory messages. Daniel, for example, felt plagued by same-sex attractions in his youth,

going to the altar weekly to try to cleanse himself: "I am an awful person, for me to be thinking

like this every day. I must not be good. How can there be any good in me?" (gay may, 48) He

described his self-worth at the time as "a zero, it was just a negative quantity for me. I really

believed that in God's sight, I must be an awful person." Amani tried to be "saved" in her

evangelical church at age 17, hoping it would "make [her] straight, forever. But it didn't." At the

time of our interview she was really struggling with a pervasive lack of self-worth. Though she still defined as Christian, she said, "I sometimes feel like God shouldn't be loving me, for being gay" (bisexual woman, 28).

About half of the 35 participants had faced some psychological or emotional struggles. Common concerns were low self-esteem, body image issues, a pervasive sense of not being worthy or lovable, and times of extreme shame. Several experienced depression, some were cutting or harming themselves, and several had been suicidal at least once. Some described anxiety disorders and panic attacks. As Beth said, "I had my own homophobic stuff. You know, I wanted to kill myself for a while, 'cause it was really hard for me to swallow, to go against the norm and everything" (lesbian woman, 47).

One woman in her 20s was still actively cutting as a physical release from emotional pain. She was sometimes suicidal and was under treatment for depression. Another woman in her late 20s had come out to her mother around age 19: "It [being lesbian] was something that I had bottled up for so long. I had gotten to the point where I was cutting myself too. I was very depressed and just, I had a lot of trouble accepting myself. ... Alcohol and different things, drama, didn't really help with the depression." Aron experienced bodily disconnection until beginning to take testosterone, and connecting with a transgender community: "I think that a lot of my self-harming tendencies like physically self-harming [and] a tendency towards addiction, had to do with numbing my body" (queer transperson, 23). Aron described at one point, "being really depressed and self-destructive and suicidal, ... trapped in this dysfunctional relationship, and then also dealing with a pretty serious drug addiction."

Many of those who suppressed LGBTQ identities for extended periods said their depression or anxiety lifted once they came out. With loss of family and community they may

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have been lonely or isolated, but they felt less internal conflict. After leaving her church, Jennifer noted that the year she left her church was the first year in her adult life that she did not have a major depressive episode: "I think it was the stress of trying to live a double life... living that duality, that takes a dreadful toll on a person" (lesbian woman, 35).

Only five participants spoke about addictions, though we also did not ask about this specifically. Will went through periods of homelessness after he was asked to leave his church for being gay. When he tried to reconnect with his former church, he faced a painful meeting with the elders and deacons: "They basically told me I was a horrible person. ...They basically, what I would call, religiously abused me. They used their authority and they made me feel crazy. After that, I went into the mental ward, because it was that intense" (gay man, 30). Eventually he hit bottom doing a lot of drugs: "I started doing blow in Halifax, and before I knew it, I was in Toronto in a crack den." By age 30 he had been in detoxification programs three times. Bernie used drugs and alcohol from his early teens through his 20s, in part to deal with being sexually abused by a priest, in part to suppress his fear about stigma and discrimination because he was gay. He progressed to heavy heroine use and tried twice to kill himself (Two Spirit man, 51).

Resolving conflicts between LGBTQ identities and religions/spirituality

Interestingly, those who had studied Christian theology intensely appeared to have much less internal conflict about their LGBTQ identities. They understood multiple levels of ambiguity surrounding the Bible, and saw unambiguous teachings condemning homosexuality as (flawed) human interpretations. Quincy, for example, had attended a Christian university, and later become an ordained head elder in his conservative church, frequently preaching. He really never struggled with coming out as gay, because he knew from his training in academic theology that scholars acknowledge considerable ambiguity regarding homosexuality in the Bible. Whereas

churches may condemn it, theological texts are far more nuanced. Quincy's conflict concerned the impact of coming out on his family and community, not on his soul: "When I was coming to terms, it was not the theology that distressed me, it was the practical consequences. 'What will happen to my family? What will happen to my relationships?'" (gay man, 38)

One participant, who had trained as a minister, described similar turmoil. She completed seminary training, and was in her second position as a pastor when she started coming out to herself. Again, her faith did not pose conflicts for her as a lesbian, the church community did:

For me, it's never been a theological issue. This is not God's problem with me. This is other people's problem. This is the perception of some of the church community. This is not God; this is other Christians you have to worry about. (laugh) ... You know, 'God is okay with this. It's the people that I work with and for, how do I navigate this?' (lesbian woman, 35)

Another participant fell in love with a woman while training as a minister in her late 30s, and came out as lesbian during the next decade. Again, she experienced no conflict with her religious beliefs, though she did with some church members.

Lastly, Dayna had studied intensely in numerous faith traditions throughout more than 40 years, including several Christian denominations, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Druidism, Native spirituality, Sufism, Kabbalah, mysticism and Gnosticism, Wiccan, Asatru (Norse paganism) and Icelandic runes. Dayna lived in several different countries to study their beliefs. At the core, Dayna identified as Christian and had completed a Masters degree in theology, which confirmed the belief that mainstream churches preach selective theology, governed by politics more than faith (woman-loving, gender-fluid, 48).

Separating religion, church and spirituality

Separating beliefs from the people and politics of a specific church appeared key for many participants as they found ways to integrate LGBTQ identities. Kyle found it impossible to reconcile teachings about love for others with the judgment he observed and experienced from people in his Presbyterian church. Though many of his personal beliefs remained congruent with Christianity, he could not connect with a church: "I guess the head honchos of the Christian faith let me down so much that I refuse to give them my faith. Because I don't think that they deserve it, they let me down" (gay man, 29). Also raised Presbyterian, Will echoed, "I still love church. I still love God, but I had an issue with the people" (gay man, 30). Jennifer emphasized the importance of separating religion from people and politics: "I consider myself blessed, having been able to make that distinction, that this is not God who has a problem with me, this is the church. This is people who have their minds bound up in an ideology that is not necessarily what I believe to be true" (lesbian woman, 35).

Others clearly separated religion from spirituality. Cameron, for example, loved the ritual and majesty of Catholicism, but never experienced it as particularly spiritual: "I knew what God represented to me, but the messages coming through the official channels didn't match what I thought God would go for (laugh)." She described her spiritual life even as a teen as "intense, deep" and focused on mysticism and direct connection to the divine (bisexual woman, 38). At 48, Daniel had left an evangelical church only a few years earlier, and saw himself as spiritual but not religious: "I don't call myself a Christian anymore. I call myself more of a spiritual person. Because I don't go to church. I don't find solace in the church. I don't find that I can worship there." Peter had also left a very conservative Christian church, but his belief in God had not changed, only his belief in the church: "I have exactly the same beliefs I had all my life. [I: So God is still there, in the same way?] Absolutely. But there's no mediator. There's no church

there telling me what, how I connect with Him. It's so liberating" (gay man, 59). Jennifer, too, found separating church and spirituality freeing: "God does not live in that white building... What is feeding your own soul and spirit? And do you need to go into a particular building to do that? I've let go of that, the idea that you need to do that" (lesbian woman, 35).

Both Dale and Clare argued that separating religion and spirituality in fact deepened their spiritual lives. Dale thought the hypocrisy he had witnessed in mainstream religions blocked spiritual connection, as that which is "good and pure and honest" is rejected through church dogma (gay man, 35). Clare found leaving Catholicism substantially enhanced her own spiritual life, because she had to figure it out for herself.

> I think I have a far more articulated and self-aware construct of spirituality than I
> did when I was going through the motions, because I didn't realize I was going
> through the motions ... My own spirituality, while deeply framed by that ritual
> and by that practice, only surfaced once I was able to look at it from the outside.
> (lesbian woman, 51)

Remaining with the faith tradition of upbringing

Nine of the 35 participants remained more-or-less in the religious traditions with which they were raised. This was true for 3 of the 4 Jewish participants. Deborah disconnected from Judaism in her late teens, but reconnected with anti-Zionist Judaism in her 20s. She maintained weekly prayer and ritual, respecting Jewish holidays, and 'queering' traditions: "I sit with what I know to be the tradition and really sort through what makes sense for me. So I do a lot of like, queering everything, every ritual that I partake in." She held Seders with friends, collectively writing their own guiding Haggadah. Rather than leaving her faith tradition, she was finding ways to make it fit for her, such as emphasizing the Jewish tradition of critique and critical thinking. "Queerness

is about querying our sexuality but also querying everything that we do, which is about really

thinking critically and not accepting the *status quo*" (queer woman, 26). Isaac (gay man, 68)

stayed involved with his synagogue, joining committees to examine inclusiveness in rituals and

in the language of prayers, as well as participating in decision-making concerning same-sex

marriage.

Three of the Christians who stayed involved with the faith traditions of their upbringings

were with churches that were relatively affirming of LGBTQ people. Three others remained

connected to much more conservative Christian traditions. Lee-Anne attended a Baptist church

where she felt welcome, but continued to see herself as Catholic: "I would describe my

Catholicism right now as, I never stopped believing, I just stopped feeling welcome. I'm very

Marian, into the doctrine, but at some point I just stopped feeling welcome in the church"

(lesbian woman, 33). She found the inclusion of the Baptist church very moving, yet still sought

a welcoming Catholic church.

Will had been asked to leave his evangelical church more than once, yet kept returning:

"It's where I felt loved, where I felt community. It's where I connected" (gay man, 30). In a

relatively new relationship with a Christian man, Will was attending a Baptist church. He found

more liberal Christian churches uncomfortable because he could not quite ascertain their

theological beliefs. Similarly, Quincy had left his conservative Christian church after divorce and

coming out as gay, he returned to that church though he found their teachings stubbornly

intolerant. He felt shut down, shut out. He and his partner were seeking a place to worship

regularly. A major struggle is that he experiences service to his church as a key part of his

spiritual life, "being the conduit of the holy spirit," and the churches with which he connects

theologically do not readily offer leadership to gay men. Yet he finds the beliefs of more affirming churches lacking the "intellectual and theological engagement" he seeks (gay man, 38).

Adopting a new path or tradition

Only six participants had moved from one faith tradition to another which they experienced as more open to as LGBTQ people. Three women had become Buddhists as adults, having been raised Catholic or evangelical Christian. Rosa found a "home" in Buddhism in her early 50s, when she was coming out as lesbian: "One of the basics of Buddhism is that we are perfect the way we are. They teach you how to accept yourself unconditionally. ... The lesbian is one part of who you are" (lesbian woman, 58). Melanie took Buddhist vows in her 40s, which included the intention to live truthfully; she came out to herself almost immediately afterward: "Taking refuge [committing to Buddhism] means knowing the truth and acknowledging the truth. And this is the truth" (bisexual woman, 56).

Similarly, for Cathy coming out as queer "was the beginning of me being dedicated to truth in my life" (queer woman, 33). Having explored various paths, she connected with paganism.

A big tenant of paganism is to be responsible for one's own actions, which I highly, highly believe in. ... I like the symbolism in paganism. And it seems more free to interpretation for me. There's also a bit more carnal pleasure available in it, which I am very much in support of. Because I feel like I'm here for a joyful life and life is hard. And I have a lot of sadness, so I need to balance that with joy.

Sam (gay man, 48) had also adopted paganism, gradually, after rejecting the Catholic church. He and his first long-term partner explored Wiccan and pagan rituals as a way to mark the passing of seasons and cycles. They crafted personal rituals, and marked the passing of loved ones with

pagan rituals and blessings. At the time of the interview, Sam was connected with a small group of gay men who identified as pagan and occasionally did rituals together.

Bernie had also left the Catholic church as a teen. In his 30s and 40s he developed a strong connection with Aboriginal spiritual practices, identifying as Two Spirit: "It's like a gender identity. It's not what you present outside. You balance your male and female, perfectly, the two spirits within me, male and female." Following the "Red Road," an Aboriginal spiritual and life path, and guided by elders, he did daily smudging rituals and regular sweats: "It cleanses you, spiritually, physically, mentally" (Two Spirit, 51).

Creating an individual relationship to spirituality

Only three of the 35 participants said they had entirely abandoned anything religious or spiritual. Sarah, for example, said of all organized religions, "I don't really have an interest in that, and haven't for a long time" (lesbian woman, 52). Yet she found sacred music, especially choral music, spiritually moving, even attending church occasionally to hear a good choir. The other 32 participants had crafted some form of relationship to spirituality, often an individualized set of beliefs and practices. Many people had explored multiple faith traditions in their 20s, eventually putting together various components that fit for them. As Paulina said, "I take part of everything I read and have kind of made up my own thing" (queer woman, 22). Cameron, too, had borrowed from a number of traditions, saying, "I didn't want to follow somebody else's prepackaged notion of what was going on. I've picked and chosen a stew of a lot of good stuff from all over the place" (bisexual woman, 38).

Some people meditated, reflected, or wrote, did yoga or tarot or listened to music, some sang. For some, private time was key, for others ritual was key; for a few the spiritual infused everyday activities, and for some the key was gathering and focusing energy alongside other

people. Both Aron and Ross, a gay man 32 years his senior, found activism for social change spiritual, grounded in hope and faith.

The most consistently mentioned source of spiritual connection for participants was nature. Sylvie, for example, spoke evocatively about nature evoking transcendence:

> Spirituality to me is ... a part of what builds your foundation... It is something inside of you, that you conjure up yourself. Some sort of power, strength, calmness, confidence, security, sense of 'Nothing is going to happen to me. I'm going to be all right.' …For me, it's nature. I go to the beach and I love being around the water. I love looking at beautiful scenery. I love smelling the grass. I love smelling the air. It gives me a sense of ... there's just so much more, you know, there has to be, because the beauty and the power of nature is just so intense. (lesbian woman, 48)

Dale, too, found spending time in wilderness, close to natural elements, helped him cut through mundane distractions: "Letting go of everything... and remembering what's really important." (gay man, 35). As Peter said, "I think I'm as close to God as anywhere on earth just sitting on a rock and hearing the water" (gay man, 59). Saul noted a very particular spiritual connection to nature, where he never experienced transgender prejudice: "The plants and animals [never] judge me, gender me. I can go there and connect and not have to worry" (queer/bisexual transman, 24).

Connecting fully with LGBTQ identity, sexuality, and/or community was also experienced as spiritual for some people. Several participants spoke of living "authentically." Doris, for example, experienced coming out as lesbian as an expression of heart and soul, and connection to the Divine.

> When there's something that resonates, and resonates deeply,... it's like an instant text message from the Divine that there's something here that is of the holy. There's

a deep knowing within me, that I trust, which I didn't trust before. ... The part of my

being that was dormant, or repressed, for forty years, that part of my being was

stirred. And is it entwined with what I understand as my soul? I think it is.

For Doris, living spiritually meant, "To continue becoming who we are created to be, ... to

be fully who we are" (lesbian woman, 64). Beth described spirituality as, "finding that

place inside of yourself, and feeding that stillness or that basic goodness" (lesbian woman,

47).

A few participants extended their notion of the spiritual to include sexuality itself.

Cameron, for example, experienced sex as utterly spiritual. With her partner of 24 years, she was

totally present, connecting with all of her senses to the Divine in her partner. They used

particular sexual practices to heighten sensory connections, trust, and intimacy, requiring them to

be totally in the body, yet transcend the body. She described sex as, "Souls entwining, mystical...

for me, sexuality and spirituality are all just one thing" (bisexual woman, 38). Sam used similar

language. A deep spiritual bond with his first long-term partner helped him overcome Catholic

sexual repression, learning to experience sex as Divine:

I saw the expression of sex, or making love between us, as a spiritual practice in

itself. And that's something that I did not ever have an understanding of within the

Catholic Christian tradition that I was raised in. Sex was essentially viewed as a

necessary evil. And I was quite happy (laugh) to let go of that idea, and instead view

erotic play with my partner as a way of touching the Divine.... it's a concept that fit

very well with a more pagan framework as well. To see sexuality as Divine, to see

sexuality as spiritual. Not as something dirty, to be ashamed of, to be hidden. ... not

being ashamed of what I did in bed.

The place of spirituality in LGBTQ communities

There was general agreement among most participants that spirituality benefits individuals and communities that face adversity. The overwhelming perception, however, was that spirituality is not really welcome in LGBTQ communities. Some argued that organized religion is rejected in LGBTQ communities, but spirituality is welcomed, especially earth-based or New Age spiritualities. Most participants said both religion and spirituality were soundly rejected in the LGBTQ communities they knew. Rick spoke of "church phobia... an irrational rabid response" (gay man, 48). Cathy commented, "There's a lot of mistrust. It hasn't been a place where queers have been allowed or felt safe" (queer woman, 33). Dierdre suggested there is too much "stigma and fear of being judged" for most people to risk talking about spirituality (lesbian woman, 27).

Those who identified as spiritual often felt marginalized within LGBTQ spaces, and this intensified for those who identified with specific faith traditions. Many of the interviews revealed a sense of loneliness, isolation, exclusion, marginalization, and even ostracism. As a pagan, Sam said, "I still feel like an outsider, for the spiritual path that I've come to" (gay man, 48). As a Christian, Doris remarked, "All of the women with whom I'm friends, the circle that I'm inside of, none of them are connected to religious community in any way shape or form. All of them have had bad experiences" (lesbian woman, 64).

LGBTQ communities may be replicating the kind of exclusions so many previously faced within faith communities, shutting out or silencing those who express themselves as spiritual, especially if that spiritual focus is Christian. As Jennifer joked, "They say don't tell your Christian friends you're queer and don't tell your queer friends you're a Christian. (laugh) Because people see those two worlds as separate" (lesbian woman, 35). Lee-Anne drew a parallel between first being closeted as bisexual, then being closeted as a Catholic.

Sometimes it just feels like you have to be one or the other... Especially when I

was a little younger, sometimes it was like, 'Maybe I should keep this quiet,

because this isn't really talked about.' You know? But, not realizing how much of

a disservice it was doing to myself, because it was going from suppressing my

sexuality to suppressing my spirituality. (lesbian woman, 33)

Those who were clergy felt uniformly isolated, even ostracized. One participant wanted a

relationship, but found it nearly impossible to meet people who were not scared off by the

'clergy' label: "I know I come with this big yellow warning label 'Clergy'. (laugh) You know? I

might as well be radioactive." Another noted that the marginalization within LGBTQ

communities echoed an ongoing marginalization within the faith tradition, even in relatively

affirming churches: "I'm aware of the assumptions that are being made by friends, ... So, there's

that sense of oddness that I feel... But also, I've always been sort of on the margin of the church."

This sense of estrangement from community was echoed by another clergy member:

I think within myself I'm all right. It's finding my place in the community, in both

contexts. Finding a place for myself as a queer within the Christian community,

and a place for myself as Christian within the queer community. There is room for

both. But I haven't found it yet.

Several people argued that LGBTQ communities need to find better ways to support their

members in being fully themselves as spiritual beings, to strengthen the individuals as well as the

community.

Discussion: Implications for Counseling

The pain experienced by many LGBTQ people in connection with organized religions is clear,

here and in other studies. What is notable is that despite a cultural shift to a more secular society

(Clark & Schellenberg, 2006), for those involved with Christian traditions the harm is not lessening. Even very young participants in this study experienced homonegative and sex-negative messages, shame, guilt, and anxiety about eternity in hell. Even some very young Christians suffered low self-esteem, depression, and self-loathing, often accompanied by addictions, self-harming and suicidal ideation.

As found previously (Murr, 2013; Rodriguez, 2009; Subhi & Geelan, 2012), not everyone experienced internal conflicts between LGBTQ identities and religious or spiritual beliefs. The Jewish participants, the one Atheist, and one Christian transwoman, did not. The same was true for more nominal Christians, and those whose religiosity was mainly connected to family – while they experienced little spiritual conflict, they did face family conflict. Others seemed inured to identity conflict because they knew theology in depth; they faced struggles with *churches*, but the theology they knew did not preclude LGBTQ Christianity.

About two-thirds of the Christians, however, and almost all of those raised 'intensely Christian,' experienced deep conflict between religious and LGBTQ identities, centered on homonegative and sex-negative messages, shame and guilt, and fears about sin and hell (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; García, 2008; Levy & Lo, 2013; Murr, 2013; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Rodriguez, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Super, 2011; Westerfield, 2012; Yarhouse, 2012). As documented elsewhere (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Bowers et al., 2010), people internalized homophobia and tried to disavow their sexuality. They often resorted to some form of separation from their own bodies. One of the ironies – given prevalent stereotypes of LGBTQ people as sexually promiscuous – is that a substantial number delayed any sexual involvement until well into early adulthood, while they grappled with same-

gender sexual attraction. Obviously body-shame and avoidance of sexual activity are important areas for counseling.

Also not surprising, people who left faith traditions (even if they did so gradually rather than being pushed out) frequently experienced profound losses – loss of faith, community, friends, and family. For counselors, it may be important to acknowledge, and to convey to clients, that such losses may change over time. This may be part of renewing hope, a component of the GRACE model for counseling (Bozard & Sanders, 2011). Sarah, for example, left her family and close-knit Christian community fairly easily, staying connected by distance. Thirty years later, as her parents aged, she found herself resenting the physical distance, yet having to navigate their perception that she would burn in hell. Clare happily left the Catholic church, resulting in a "far more articulated and self-aware construct of spirituality" (c.f. Murr, 2013). As her children reached adolescence, she struggled anew with the loss of a faith tradition that provided clear moral guidance. Others, such as Marie and Beth, experienced profound loss of family connections, stretching over 15 years, but they did reconnect. It may be helpful to young LGBTQ clients (such as Natasha who told us at age 20 that it had taken a "very, very long time" to resolve her internal conflicts) to know that even deep family rifts over religion may eventually heal.

It can be difficult for LGBTQ people of any age to find out from others about ways to resolve spirituality and LGBTQ identity. Rodriguez (2009) had commented on the anti-religious stance prevalent in LGBTQ communities. It was clear from our study participants that spirituality is as marginalized in LGBTQ communities as sexual/gender variance is in faith communities. Experiences of exclusion and isolation were intense and pervasive. Super and Jacobson (2011) note that abuse and rejection from religions leave many LGBTQ people

extremely angry, seeing religion as solely destructive. This crushes the individual's spirituality,

but may also foster a community environment where animosity toward both religion and

spirituality predominates. Counselors should be aware that clients may experience a second form

of 'closeting' in LGBTQ circles, wherein they feel compelled to hide, suppress or silence their

spiritual selves. Thoughtful counselors who help clients explore spirituality may open up

possibilities for individuals to be fully themselves, as spiritual LGBTQ people (Buser et al.,

2011; Kocet et al., 2011). As Murr suggests, counselors "can provide a safe place for individuals

to explore a spirituality that reduces feelings of shame, guilt, and hopelessness, and renews a

sense of wholeness" (2013, p. 370).

Integrating identities

Despite enormous pain from faith traditions, and intolerance within LGBTQ

communities, many study participants continued some form of spiritual seeking. For many, there

was a sense of longing, yearning. Notably, people were seeking a range of different things: a

sense of community and belonging centered on faith or spirituality; internal acceptance of self as

good, moral and worthy; moral guidance; full acceptance by the specific faith tradition of one's

upbringing, or one theologically proximal to it; an LGBTQ community that welcomes aspects of

spirituality; integration of conflicting aspects of self; connection, intensity and transcendence,

sometimes through ritual. Clarity about what an individual seeks would be important to effective

counseling (Buser et al., 2011). This reinforces the emphasis Bozard and Sanders (2011) place

on identifying client goals in relation to religion and spirituality, in their GRACE model.

Most of the study participants crafted their own relationship to an individualized form of

spirituality, something common in North America today (Buxant, Saroglou & Tesser, 2010). For

some, selecting elements from a range of faith traditions, or spiritual paths to create a novel

package was immensely satisfying. Counselors could play a role in helping clients explore other paths to find spiritual elements that resonate for them, as suggested by both Kocet and colleagues (2011) and Bozard and Sanders (2011).

In this study, nine participants remained in the faith tradition of their upbringing, six adopted new spiritual paths. Clear distinctions were important. First, the teachings of a religion are distinct from their incorporation within the institution and doctrine of a church. Notably, those who knew the most Christian theology seemed least internally conflicted. While it may be counter-intuitive, there may be times when encouraging LGBTQ clients to learn *more* about their faith tradition is actually helpful, to discern where church doctrine narrows a more ambiguous or accepting theology (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Garcíaet al., 2008; Schnoor, 2006; Siraj, 2012; Westerfield, 2012). In their study with older LGBTQ elders, Brennan-Ing and colleagues (2013) noted that reinterpreting sacred texts as a key strategy for identity integration.

Secondly, spirituality is distinct from religion. A few participants had from childhood experienced spiritual lives far beyond, and outside of, what they experienced in church. They had little conflict when coming out to themselves as LGBTQ. For others separating spirituality from religion was a key step in coming to terms with their LGBTQ selves (c.f. Barrow, 2011; García et al., 2008; Kocet et al., 2011; Porter et al., 2011). As Beth said, "finding that place inside of yourself, and feeding that stillness or that basic goodness." Collectively or individually, ritualized or as free-form as watching the ocean, people found ways to transcend the mundane. A personal connection to the sacred or transcendent through spirituality removes the power and authority of (condemning) religious institutions and figureheads (Rodriguez, 2009). In one study of transgender spirituality, the instruments routinely used to measure religiosity failed, because so many respondents had crafted individualized spirituality (Kidd & Witten, 2008).

Given the potential pain attached to spirituality and religion for LGBTQ people, as well as the collective pain of oppression, losses, and familiarity with violence and death, counseling that encourages spiritual engagement may be beneficial. Helping clients distinguish religion, church and spirituality may be helpful. Focusing on values rather than beliefs may be helpful. Co-generating a range of ways to engage may prove valuable – such as Aron and Ross engaging in social activism as spiritual work, Isaac joining synagogue committees to effect change, or Deborah 'queering' Jewish rituals with her friends. This fits well with counseling approaches previously advocated (Bozard & Sanders, 2011). Kocet and colleagues (2011) note that within LGBTQ communities there already exist elements of the spiritual – use of symbols reflecting both loss and hope, use of ritual to celebrate and express joy, use of stories or parables to create community and growth. Recognizing this may be helpful for some clients.

Conclusion

It is clear that religions have caused and continue to cause immense pain and suffering in LGBTQ lives. The losses have been, and continue to be, enormous. Yet many people continue to long for something, yearn for something. Participants spoke of a void, an emptiness, a search for greater meaning. Even those who had found spiritual solace, most often through individualized spiritual beliefs and practices, often felt a need to hide that in LGBTQ circles. There is clearly a deep and pervasive tension concerning spirituality in LGBTQ communities. Just as LGBTQ selves were often unwelcome in religious communities, so spiritual selves are often unwelcome in LGBTQ communities. Counselors have a key role to play in facilitating integration of spirituality and sexuality/gender variance, not only for individuals but for LGBTQ communities.

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Table 1: Participant demographics

Age (years)	#	Gender identity	#	Sexual Orientation	#
20-30	11	Man	11	Gay	10
31-40	6	Woman	19	Lesbian	11
41-50	7	Trans/queer	4	Bisexual	4
51-60	7	Other	1	Heterosexual	1
61+	4			Queer	7
				Other	2
Ethnicity	**#**				
Caucasian	23				
Jewish	4				
Other	8				

Table 2: Faith tradition growing up and current beliefs

Tradition raised in	#	Current beliefs	#
Non-Christian	6*	None	8
Somewhat Christian	12*	Spiritual	8
Intensely Christian	18	Christian	7
*Adds to more than 35; one person was raised by one Jewish parent, one Christian parent		Other	4
		Jewish	3
		Buddhist	3
		Pagan	2