

For the Love of God: A Look at Religious Students' Beliefs on LGBTQ+ Issues

by

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This thesis analyzes interviews conducted with 15 college students who self-identify as religious, specifically as members of what are known as Abrahamic traditions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Through analyzing participants' responses to inquiries regarding issues such as his paper attempts to fill a gap in the field of religious and queer studies research by specifically focusing on young adults, a group that is chronically understudied when it comes to ethnographic or other research-based interviews. During the interviews, I asked participants a series of questions, delving into their religious practices, backgrounds, and beliefs alongside questions on political identity specifically focused on perceptions of LGBTQ+ people and issues.

The college students that participated in these interviews supported the notion that their religious identity, regardless of which religion the individual practiced did mold their attitude toward LGBTQ+ issues. Consistent themes included the value of community, non-judgment, respect, complexity in inter- and intra-faith dialogues, and what I have deemed the "I'm not an expert" dilemma. This paper will also take a look at the minority of participants who identify as politically Christian, as well as those who identify as both religious and queer, to understand how certain political or other identities impact young adult beliefs on religion and sexuality. Taken together, these interviews provide a compelling example of the complexity of thought that can be found in the vibrant religious communities on college campuses.

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Preface

I would like to thank my BPhil committee members:

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Their support was essential to this project.

I would also like to thank my participants for their openness about their religious and sexual identities and beliefs. This study would not have been possible if not for these participants' willingness to share their opinions with the research team.

It's important for me to highlight my positionality on this issue. I was a deeply devoted member of the United Methodist Church until 2019, when the denomination was deciding whether to allow LGBTQ+ clergy and same-sex marriages to be conducted by pastors. My minister and I were on opposite ends of the issue, leading to several confrontations that ended when he ran to avoid me at our local grocer. I have always been intrigued by the intersections of religious identity and LGBTQ+ positions since before high school, when I conducted a research project like this for an AP Research course. While this issue is personal to me, I believe that it has only guided my passion to understand the various understandings of religious college students on such a divisive topic. I hope to portray the words and ideas of my interviews objectively and fairly, however, my position as a queer gender-nonconforming person who also identifies as religious, may very well shine through in this paper. After all, life experiences are what makes each of us interesting and

different from anyone else, and in the modern political landscape, this research is even more relevant to shape the future of policy change in the United States.

In this thesis, and as a self-identifying queer individual, I will be using the words “queer” and “LGBTQ+” interchangeably. Queer theory, a term coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991, describes the study of LGBTQ+ people and issues as a complex network of identities rather than a single “gay” experience, and this coincides with an increase in colloquial acceptance of the term. This is not to imply that all LGBTQ+ people specifically identify as queer, nor does it mean that all LGBTQ+ people are comfortable with the term. While this paper uses the words interchangeably, the word queer is loaded with connotations that are determined in a case-by-case basis, and thus it is important to use these words with an awareness of their various meanings.

Also, this paper uses the word “religious” in the context of self-identification. The flyers for this project specifically sought students who identified as religious and were asked again during the interview if they identified as religious. There is no qualification of the word religious other than how participants self-identify. There was no set limit or bar to meet to qualify as religious, and this paper hinges on the notion that religious students are simply those who self-identify as religious.

Quotes in this section have been edited for clarity or brevity, but the sentiment remains as close as possible to the original responses of the participants.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this is a heavy and potentially triggering topic. Discussions of homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, discrimination, violence, drug abuse, and other hard topics will come up in this thesis.

1.0 Introduction

“There’s such a large difference in how our generation views homosexuality and how even my parents or grandparents view it. Young adults have this increased idea of tolerance, and I think that’s liable to just keep going.” This quote is from one Christian participant in this study who was asked about the generational differences in how society, and specifically religious adults, view LGBTQ+ issues. When entering this research, the central question behind the interviews was “How do young religious-identifying adults view LGBTQ+ issues through a religious and political lens?” The participants of this study are all students who belong to the age demographic of 18-29 years of age and engaged in interviews that attempted to understand their personal beliefs on LGBTQ+ issues and how they feel their religion tied into their beliefs or, at times, contradicted them. This paper will endeavor to elucidate the complexity of the world of religious young people through narrative interviews and examination of themes present in answers from students of many religious backgrounds, with the goal of highlighting the importance of nuance when talking about the intersections of age, religion, and LGBTQ+ issues. Themes of uncertainty in their religious beliefs, the value of community, the importance of non-judgment, and the challenges of conversations about LGBTQ+ issues, both within and outside of the participants’ religions. This paper will also endeavor to examine the beliefs of two minorities among participants: those who identified as conservative and those who identified as queer. With the issues of LGBTQ+ identity so politicized, both of these minorities serve as important groups to understanding parts of the political and religious landscape of young adults.

The United States of America has seen a radical shift in its perceptions of LGBTQ+ people in the past 20 years. In 1996, 68 percent of Gallup poll participants stated that same-sex marriages should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages. When respondents were asked the same question in a 2023 poll, 71 percent of participants answered “Should be valid,” (Gallup). While same-sex marriage by no means represents the entire category of LGBTQ+ rights and issues, it has served as an important metric for gauging the American public’s perceptions of LGBTQ+ people since the 1980s (Gallup 2023). Recent studies by the Pew Research Center have attempted to examine who has contributed to the public discourse on LGBTQ+ issues and how various identities impact a person’s perceptions of LGBTQ+ identity, with varying results: women are statistically more likely than men to say they believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society, Democrats and Republicans have almost a 30 percentage point gap (83 to 54 percent, respectively) in how likely they are to say that society should accept homosexuality, and those with at least some college education are more likely to say they believe that society should be more accepting of homosexuality than those without a college education.

In attempting to understand this shift in public perception, Pew Research Center also gathered information on generational differences in attitudes toward LGBTQ+ acceptance, finding that those aged 18-29 (as of this study) were over twenty percentage points more likely than those aged 65+ to say that society should accept homosexuality (Pew Research Center 2017). My research attempts to show why such a generational divide exists without making broader claims. (Pew Research Center 2017).

Being religious, in this line of logic, automatically means being less likely to accept LGBTQ+ people. This claim does find its footing in statistical evidence, with a recent Pew

Research Center poll finding that there was a 22 percentage point gap in acceptance of homosexuality between those who were religiously unaffiliated and those who declared a religious affiliation (88% to 66% respectively) (Connaughton 2020). Furthermore, since United States adults over 40 are 17 percentage points more likely to identify with a religious group than those under 40 (Pew Research Center 2018), a correlation can be seen between one's religious affiliation, age, and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.

However, the issue of LGBTQ+ acceptance is far more complicated than simply being a matter of religion or age. Many factors, including various identities and political events, impact every person's perceptions of LGBTQ+ people. Those who lived through the AIDS epidemic, Stonewall riot, or any other moment of significant cultural change in understanding will have a far different opinion on LGBTQ+ rights than those who did not. It would be erroneous and patently false to say that because someone is old, they must be religious or they must be anti-LGBTQ. In the same vein, it would also be untrue to say that because someone is young, they must identify as non-religious or be pro-LGBTQ acceptance.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 45 percent of respondents between 18 and 29 years of age self-identified as religious (J. Jones 2023). In this study, 18-29-year-olds appeared more likely to identify as religious than 30-49-year-olds, of which only 38 percent self-identified as religious (J. Jones 2023). Belonging to two demographics that are often posited as opposite ends of a political spectrum, with "young" being a descriptor often associated with acceptance and "religious" carrying a non-accepting connotation in an era of great political tension surrounding the issue of LGBTQ+ rights. Thus, this paper will endeavor to shed light on some of the political and social understandings of young religious people in regard to LGBTQ+ issues from the University of Pittsburgh. With students from at least 46 states and 35 countries outside of the

United States (S. Jones 2023), the student body of the University of Pittsburgh hosts a large breadth of cultural backgrounds, yet a majority of the students at the University of Pittsburgh are in-state students (S. Jones 2023), meaning they list their primary address as within the state of Pennsylvania. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, approximately 46.89% of adults in living Pennsylvania identify as religious (2020b). When compared to the approximate 48% of adults in the United States who identify as religious (Association of Religion Data Archives 2020a), Pennsylvania adults serve as a relatively similar microcosm for US religious identity that could serve as a compelling focal point for research.

2.0 Methodology

As a BPhil research project, the entire scope of the research-based section of the degree is two years. This means two years to design a study, obtain IRB approval, conduct the research, write a thesis, and then defend it for a dissertation committee. The original goal of the study had been to emulate the research of the many ethnographers who study religion and/or sexuality, such as Melissa Wilcox and Esther Newton. Books like *Queer Nuns* (Wilcox 2020a), *Queer Religiosities* (Wilcox 2020b), and *Mother Camp* (Newton 1972) provided crucial dialogues to the fields of queer and religious studies. However, due to the shortened time frame of this thesis, any kind of in-depth, immersive community exposure and prolonged contact with researched groups were not going to be feasible. Thus, this study serves as a form of ethnography-inspired interviews with religious college students at the University of Pittsburgh. While there was a script of questions for the researcher to ask participants, this study follows a focused yet flexible guide during the course of the interviews (Rubin & Rubin 2013), allowing participants' responses to shape the course of the interviews with varying follow-up questions dependent on the content of their replies.

The college student was specifically chosen as the participant pool in order to fit the age demographic that this study was aiming to target. There are several studies about queer religious young adults, such as "Negotiating Queer and Religious Identities in Higher Education" by Emily Falconer and Yvette Taylor (2017) which seeks to understand students in the United Kingdom and their approaches to religion, queerness, and higher education. This paper, entirely by coincidence, only features the voices of those from Abrahamic religions. This was not by design; any promotional materials such as flyers simply expressed a want for religious college students without

specifying a want for Abrahamic religions. However, one of the main ways participants were engaged was through religious student organizations at the University of Pittsburgh. All groups listed on the Student Organization Resource Center's (SORC) website under "Spiritual/Faith Based Groups" were Abrahamic-based religious organizations, as of the relaunch of their platform in 2023 (University of Pittsburgh). This unintentional focus on Abrahamic religions is a part of the broader context of Pennsylvania; only approximately 4% of the adult population surveyed by Pew Research Center identified as religious but not Jewish, Christian, or Muslim (2022). Thus, the prevalence of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in the religious makeup of the state of Pennsylvania has seemingly impacted the landscape of "Faith Based Groups" on the University of Pittsburgh's campus.

However, this focus on Abrahamic traditions allowed for a deeper analysis of comparisons between religions with a similar cultural root. Several stories were mentioned across interviews of those who practice Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, such as the story of the Prophet Lut, or Lot, and the tales of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Each Abrahamic religion has their own version of this same story, with debates rising in each over whether the principle sin was homosexuality or inhospitality and sexual assault. One Muslim participant, Participant 13, highlighted this similarity between the Abrahamic religions by describing their conversations with friends of other faiths and hearing references to the same prophets found in Islam. Participant 13 continued talking about their own personal research into the shared story of Lot/Lut and stating that "[the sin in some interpretations] wasn't that they couldn't love who they loved, it was more this idea of nonconsensual issues, so I'm a little confused on that." The cross-pollination of religious ideas between these religions has given rise to debates on interpretation such as this one, and it makes studying these three religions in specific that much more compelling.

I set the original goal number of participants after extensive understanding of other similar studies. Given the short-term nature of this study, certain long-term ethnographic methods cannot be utilized, such as wider community reach and contextual understandings of a group from an inside perspective. Thus, the aim was for a deeper understanding of the perspectives of certain religious-identifying students on the University of Pittsburgh's campus. "Sample Size for Interview in Qualitative Research in Social Sciences: A Guide to Novice Researchers", written in 2022 by Wasihun Bezabih Bekele and Fikire Yohanes Ago in the journal *Research in Educational Policy and Management (REPAM)* provided the research model that fuses ethnographic research methods and case studies in an attempt to accommodate the short-term nature of the project. Thus, the goal sample size was 20 participants in a compromise between the larger form of ethnography and the more condensed form of case studies. The research team received over 20 students who indicated via a form or by email that they were interested in participating in the study, yet only 15 responded to the research team's attempts at contact. Thus, the true sample size of this study is 15 collegiate religious students. This size still works for the close reading of interviews that was necessary for this form of research, and it provided for a more in-depth analysis of certain interviews.

Finally, this thesis will refer to participants only by their participation number, given to them through the interview (see Appendix), and self-identified religious identity. The race of each participant was not factored into the analysis of their responses in an effort to maintain as much anonymity as possible. This variable may prove in future research to be a distinguishing variable for participant responses and themes, especially at schools like the University of Pittsburgh that is a predominantly white institution (PWI). The discussion of how race connects to other identities is a vital consideration for both fields of queer theory and religious studies, with articles such as "Straight Gods, White Devils" by Simone Kolysh exemplifying the powerful intersections of race,

queerness, and religion, yet it is not a focus of this study due to concerns for the anonymity of participants, especially non-white participants from a PWI.

Likewise, gender identity/sex assigned at birth was not collected in the interview process for similar reasons of anonymity. Thus, “they/them” pronouns will be used to refer to all participants to protect the confidentiality of the participants. I do reference sect or denomination only when necessary for distinctions between different ideologies. Certain quotes may not list a specific participant number for the sake of brevity or increased privacy for the individual. Any resemblance a participant shares with someone in the University of Pittsburgh community should not be assumed to identify a specific person as a participant in this study.

3.0 Themes

This section of the paper is devoted to exploring common themes from the interviews. While each person had their own understanding of faith, religion, and the place for the LGBTQ+, there were quite a few similarities between participants, even between those of different religions or political ideologies. Some themes I noticed include the “I’m not an expert” dilemma, the importance of community, the value of respect, love and non-judgment, and the complexity of dialogues on the LGBTQ+ with members of their own religious communities, as well as those outside of their faith communities.

3.1 The “I’m not an Expert” Dilemma

During the course of all 15 interviews for this study, almost every single participant said something to the effect of “I can’t speak to that” or “well, I’m no expert” to the point that it warranted its own subsection as a theme of the interviews. The qualification of their experience by inserting phrases like “I think” or “I may be wrong” became a trend. Religious students feel the need to dampen their credibility on the topic of religious belief.

3.1.1 A Perceived Lack of Knowledge on Specific Issues

The first factor in participants’ hesitancy to claim expertise was a perceived lack of understanding of certain, more niche topics in their religious life. Participants would say things

like “I’m not as well researched in this area as I’d like to be” when asked questions about specific scriptures or rules that addressed LGBTQ+ issues. When explaining the gendering of roles in Muslim society, one participant explained “I’m not really good at explaining this [concept]. It seems like a very abstract concept nowadays, but I personally think there is some truth to [the heterosexual model of gendered interaction].” This participant went on to explain that even though the idea of gender is more malleable in modern society, they believed that there was an aspect of truth to the Muslim principles of the traditional gender binary; men and women are inherently equals meant to balance each other, according to this participant, yet they didn’t want to discount the modern discussions on a more flexible system of gender for those who are gender-nonconforming.

In many interviews, participants also noted that conversations about gender and sexuality, especially LGBTQ+ gender and sexuality, were not common within their religious communities or family units. These participants recalled unease around these topics due to their controversial subject matter, and they usually avoided these conversations with religious elders for fear of an argument or having to hear a position with which they fervently disagreed. Therefore, they shared a belief that they might not have been as knowledgeable about issues of LGBTQ+ acceptance in religious contexts due to their avoidance of the topic.

3.1.2 The Issue of Speaking on a Community To Which One Does Not Belong

Many also used “I’m not an expert” statements to denote that they were speaking about a different sect or denomination of their religion, or that they were speaking about a community to which they did not necessarily belong. When talking about the varying sects of Judaism, one

Jewish participant said “I can’t speak to orthodoxy because I’m not part of that community. I know that my sect is generally accepting of LGBTQ+ people, but I don’t want to generalize because each sect is different.” Another participant began to explain their perception of acceptance for LGBTQ+ people and how it seemed more accepting now to them, only to say “I don’t think it’s my place to say that actually. I take that back. I got lost in my own thoughts.” This participant, who does not identify as LGBTQ+, expressed a concern that they did not have the authority to speak to LGBTQ+ acceptance or discrimination because they had never faced that discrimination herself.

3.1.3 The Avoidance of Stereotypes: A Specific Look at Islam

The “I’m not an expert” dilemma took on a new tone with participants who identified as Muslim; there was a pervasive fear on the part of participants not to say anything that could be misconstrued as a harmful or negative stereotype of the Muslim community or the religion of Islam. A participant who identifies as Muslim, Participant 11, articulated their fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes of both those who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who are Muslim through their answers to the interview questions. When asked what stereotypes they were trying to avoid, Participant 11 shared their experience as a Muslim in the modern United States and abroad:

Since 9/11, there has been a large rise in Islamophobia in the United States because the attacks were believed to be by some big, evil Muslim group that wanted to kill everybody. The word terrorist is often associated with the religion of Islam, and people who don’t know anything about Islam are going to believe the first thing that they hear from the

media. It's really unfortunate. I mean, you take a group like the KKK, and they also commit terrorist acts but you don't see Christianity being pictured as a terrorist group on the media. This fear of confirming negative stereotypes is often present across all demographics, and specifically minoritized populations like Muslims, Jewish people, queer people, people of color, and other groups that face systemic discrimination. Coined by researchers Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, "stereotype threat" is the constant consideration of the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about a person's ethnic, racial, gender, or cultural group (2011). With a minoritized position comes the mental toll of constantly worrying about one's public image; one has to be careful to avoid confirming what the mainstream public assumes about a cultural identity so as to not perpetuate that stereotype and oppression. Another Muslim participant, Participant 6, expressed a similar fear:

The idea that this is being recorded is terrifying, just so you know. One of the fears that I had going into this study was the idea of misrepresenting my religion and painting it in a negative light, because again, there's no need for that to happen. I think the media does enough to demonize my religion already, and I don't know what other people will say.

In speaking on this fear, Participant 6 emphasized that they do not speak for the entire Muslim community. "I am one person," they said. "I'm not a [religious] scholar. I could have said something that was completely wrong and that is on me and no one else." In this quote, Participant 6 combines many of the ideas in this section: their lack of status as scholar, their placement as a member of a certain sect of Islam who is unable to speak for all sects, and their fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes. They do not claim to be an expert and believe that it would be unfair to take their beliefs and assume that all Muslim people think in a similar manner. When speaking about how their faith called them to engage in this stereotype threat and move past it, Participant 6 stated

“If I’ve said anything right, that is on God, and if I have said anything wrong, that’s on me and only me.” According to Participant 6, they believed that their words were to be taken as meaningful in the context of being one person’s personal experience in the intersections of faith and sexuality, not as a blanket statement for all of the Muslim community. If Participant 6 said anything that was truthful or right, God was the one guiding them to say it. If, however, they said anything that was fallacious or wrong, it was their own human error that caused that misbelief.

The fear of falling into stereotypes becomes that much more acute when considering that their mistakes may impact how people understand an entity as nebulous and enormous as God or religion, and Participant 6, along with several other participants of all backgrounds, would expect readers to understand that as humans, their perspectives may not fully reflect God and are just as fallible as any other person’s opinions. Many participants, however, also took this as an opportunity to do the exact opposite: to correct the record and represent a new view of their religion(s) that the broader public may not have considered. Participant 11 was particularly interested in their efforts to provide a new look on religious issues, stating that “a lot of things that have been said publicly are from a standpoint that isn’t religious, and I see this as my opportunity to kind of rectify that.” While there was certainly fear around misrepresentation, some participants saw this interview as a way to deconstruct the ideas of those that public media take to be “experts” on religious issues, whether that be politicians of faith, religious leaders, or media pundits who express views as though they were universal in their religion.

While this idea of stereotype threat did not manifest itself directly in the words of Jewish participants, it is likely that students of both minoritized religions included in this study (Judaism and Islam) felt a similar concern around validating anti-Semitic or Islamophobic stereotypes, even if these stereotypes are different for each religion. As a researcher who is Christian, participants

of minoritized religions may have had concerns that I, as a non-Jewish or non-Muslim person, would judge or misunderstand their responses. My positionality as a queer Christian may have subliminally created a research environment where the threat of stereotypes was more prevalent than an environment with a researcher of the same religion. While my religion nor my sexuality was ever directly mentioned unless the participant asked themselves, their perception of my positionality may have presented a challenge to a comfortable research environment.

3.2 The Value of Community for Religious Students

The second theme to arise from the interviews was the value of community for religious students. Community came up as an answer to several questions, yet it often arose when participants were asked “What do you feel are the guiding principles/basic elements of your faith?” near the middle of the interview (see Appendix). This question came after a discussion about important rituals, texts, and stories that they felt were central to their faith. The participants identified which out of their religions’ principles they felt were central to their religious experience or faith, and those who listed community as a key principle (around half of participants) all listed community as a central tenant of their faith.

3.2.1 The Ideal and Hope for Community When Considering LGBTQ+ People

When discussing the importance of community in their religion, several participants stated that they knew that many faith groups did not provide this sense of community to all members.

Many participants noted that exclusion of certain people, i.e. queer people, led to an unequal access to the benefits of faith community and fellowship. With this acknowledgement often came the hope that faith groups could and would do more to be welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. As one Jewish participant stated, “When faith is done right, it’s supposed to be something that brings people together.” The sentiment of bringing people together to allow more people access to the benefits of religion was often mentioned in conjunction with the sentiments from section 3.2.2. Several Jewish and Muslim participants mentioned that because community was so vital to the mental and emotional health of minoritized religions, it was necessary to provide all religious people, regardless of other identities, a “safe space [with] a community to rely on,” as one participant said. This participant then explained how they viewed the importance of accepting communities through a lens of scripture:

I view [my religion] and the scriptures within it like the Quran and the Sunnahs of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) as kind of a guiding way of how you should live your life. If you have any questions or concerns, the answer to that will be in the Quran and that’s its entire purpose. It gives you perspective on how to view the world, and a lot of that perspective comes from having a very community-oriented approach. And that being very open and accepting of the people around you and being willing to humble yourself [is important].

To this participant, and many others that were interviewed, the importance of community was central to their religions’ teachings and beliefs, and to deny that to certain people based on LGBTQ+ identity was deeply wrong and ultimately harmful. Those who were members of minoritized religions were especially focused on the importance of communities, but these sentiments appeared in interviews with members of all three Abrahamic religions. Despite their differing opinions on

the sinfulness or morality of LGBTQ+ identity, many participants emphasized the need for open communities to welcome LGBTQ+ people into the religion without judgment, for both the sake of that LGBTQ+ person and the religious community at large.

3.2.2 Practices That Foster Community as Central to Faith Experience

When asked about the value of community, participants regularly related this value back to the rituals, prayers, and holidays that they had discussed as a part of a previous question (see Appendix). Community was a value that participants shared as central to their engagement in various religious events, holidays, and other practices that involve celebrating one's religion with others. One Jewish participant, Participant 9, discussed how community played a role in celebrating the High Holidays and other events in the Hebrew calendar. "Chanukah, while not actually a really important holiday in the story of Judaism, is definitely the largest family holiday and fosters that sense of community," Participant 9 said. To Participant 9, every Jewish holiday provided an opportunity for family and friends to gather and commemorate their faith. This sense of community was incredibly valuable to Participant 9 because it allowed them a space to explore their faith identity as well as connect with those close to them through meaningful worship and practice.

Other participants focused more on the community they found in weekly worship services and community events. One Catholic participant, Participant 8, discussed how weekly mass allowed them to connect with those who held the same religious identity. Participant 8 identified religious music and the use of music in worship as a key source of religious community for them. When discussing their various worship practices, Participant 8 said:

I participate in the music ministry, which is a very community-based element of my faith. You have one person cantor, or lead, the service, but then the whole choir is working together behind them to support the service. And when one of us is ill or can't cantor, another will step up to fill the gaps. Even when you are cantoring, you are singing with the congregation, not at the congregation, and it feeds into this emphasis on community.

The practice of engaging with religious music in a communal setting helped to nurture Participant 8's faith and sense of religious belonging. "We attend mass and other events for that community," Participant 8 continued, "and it allows us to keep God's will in your everyday life." To Participant 8, and several other participants in this study, the value of community lies in the communal experience of faith. These participants found a support for their identity as a religious person in these religious communities, and they stated that this sense of community or "fellowship" as some put it was central to their experience with religion. Thus, if religious groups are not accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, queer people are shut out of the community practices that fundamentally shape how they connect with their religious beliefs.

3.2.3 Community as a Tool for Minoritized Religions

Another reason for the importance of community sprouted from the interviews of Jewish and Muslim students. Members of these groups named that because they identified with a religion that is consistently faced with hate and discrimination, the community they found within religious spaces was vital to their mental health and well-being. This concept of the necessity of community for minoritized groups is by no means new, inspiring researchers at all levels to study the impact of community on the mental well-being of minoritized groups. In one study, researchers found that

“community involvement served as a mediator between experiences of discrimination (i.e., microaggressions and overt) and depression symptoms,” (Pachicano 2021). This study used symptoms of depression as a metric for mental health, and while the relationship between well-being and community is far more complicated than one set of symptoms, Pachicano’s research provides a compelling example of the benefits of community for those who face regular discrimination for their identities (Pachicano 2021).

Many participants mentioned that community allowed them to have access to a safe space to explore their religious beliefs where they knew the threat of violence and hatred was minimal. One Muslim participant shared that they had not been a diligent member of religious community groups prior to coming to college, and that once on campus they found the support these groups fundamental to their continued practice of Islam as well as their well-being on a majority white, secular campus.

Other participants emphasized the importance of community involvement on a broader scale. One Jewish participant reflected on the legacies of violence and anti-Semitism by stating “[b]ecause Judaism is an ethno-religion, we tend to stick together because people have tried to kill us. I can have drastically different political beliefs from my friends, but because we’re Jewish, we already have that bond.” This sentiment of bonds in faith that transcended other identities was echoed in several other interviews. Several participants, both Muslim and Jewish, said that the rising anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the United States and abroad had exacerbated the need for close-knit religious communities. “It’s really confusing and weird and scary,” one Jewish participant remarked, “so it’s good to have a sense of community right now.” For many participants, religious groups provided them a space of freedom from fear and harm, allowing them to explore and celebrate their religion without fear of retribution or violence. This value of

community was essential in the eyes of the participants, not only to their relationship with religion but to their sense of well-being and self. Religious community, especially for those of minoritized religious backgrounds, can be essential in creating a foundation for mental and emotional health, and exclusion from these community spaces can deeply impact members of those religions who identify as LGBTQ+

3.3 “Who am I to Judge?”: The Importance of Non-Judgment, Love, and Respect for Those Around Us

One of the most prevalent themes in these interviews was the idea that it was not the participant’s place to judge. While this idea of non-judgment came up in almost every interview, there were different variants on why the participants thought it was not their place to judge. Each participant that mentioned their belief in non-judgment had a combination of four subthemes that fall under the non-judgment umbrella: not caring, non-judgment from a place of love, a belief that someone’s behavior is between them and God, and a principle of doing unto others as you wish would be done to you.

3.3.1 Love Thy Neighbor

The first subtheme of non-judgment that emerged from the interviews was only prevalent in the responses of Christian research participants. This principle of “loving thy neighbor” is something that is quite prominent in public Christian discourse to the point that it is often a

reference in modern secular culture as well. The original foundation for this idea is found in the Bible's Book of Matthew, verses 37-40:

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Anon. n.d.-c)

While there are several different translations of these verses, the core concept remains the same: love God and love your fellow man. All participants of the Christian faith echoed this sentiment in some way, but each had their own interpretation of what "loving thy neighbor" actually meant. One participant stated that "As a person who thinks that religion should be rooted in love, I think everyone should be loved for who they are." Another defined this love for others as "treating everyone with respect." A third participant stated that they felt that "even if you don't understand someone, you can still love and support them." Understanding did not equal love in the eyes of this participant, even if understanding was an ultimate goal; this participant, Participant 8, echoed the ideas of love as respect for others and accepting other people for who they truly are that had been seen in previous interviews, yet Participant 8 expanded upon this belief in a way not reflected in other responses. When Participant 8 was asked to clarify their opinion on how Catholicism should view the LGBTQ+ community, they said:

I don't think that someone can identify as Catholic and then also say they are homophobic. To truly love thy neighbor as God asks, it's not something that can coexist with homophobia. It's a manipulation of the faith to make a certain group of people be excluded when the main tenant of the faith is to love everyone.

While this belief may not have been expressly stated by other participants, the sentiment that one could not have homophobia and Christian love coexisting was an idea that was echoed in several other participant interviews. The idea of the “true Christian” came up in a few interviews as a word to distinguish between those that participants deemed hypocritical (those who claimed homophobia and Christianity could coexist) and those they deemed as more closely adhering to the Bible. While each participant had their own conceptualization of what this “true Christian” looked like, all agreed that hatred and judgment were not values they found compatible with the ideals of their faith, regardless of denomination.

3.3.2 “That’s Between Them and God”

Many participants of all three Abrahamic faith backgrounds described their stance of non-judgment as less connected to love as to the idea that it was not their place to judge someone. To many participants, humans are fallible in the eyes of their religion and thus cannot be good judges when it comes to the morality of others. Instead, God is the final judge of actions because only God is righteous enough to judge someone’s actions as good or bad.

Some participants connected this belief that only God can judge someone with a principle of respect for others. When one participant was asked about the guiding principles of their faith, they stated:

First and foremost is respect. There is a lot that people think comes with Islam, but if you truly read the scriptures and ignore the more cultural side of things and look at the religion itself, it’s all about respect. Respect for yourself, respect of your connection to God, and most of all your respect for other people. Despite the differences and similarities you might

have with other religions, you as a person have no place shaming another person for what they believe in. That's between them and God.

Respect to this participant meant that one was not allowed to judge, ridicule, or punish others for behaviors simply because they were deemed "sinful." Instead, that judgment should be left to God since only God is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. The participant stated that their religion called them to interact with others in a respectful manner and not try to take God's role in the natural order of the world. Trying to replace God was a theme that arose in the interview with another participant, who remarked on the grave sin that was trying to become God, saying:

Like, arrogance is something that is very looked down upon, and there is this belief where it is like, you cannot judge another person for the actions that they take, because essentially the only person that can judge them is God. And you are not God. And that's a major sin to consider yourself God.

An act of judgment to this participant meant trying to usurp the natural flow of cosmic authority, and was thus a grave sin in the eyes of their religion. This sentiment was not unique, with many participants of all three Abrahamic faiths echoing a similar belief that judging others was a grave sin and thus should be avoided in an effort to live a life that was according to the principles of their religion.

3.3.3 Do Unto Others As You Would Have Done to You

To several participants, the golden rule of non-judgment was simple: treat others how you wish to be treated. It often touched on the topic of respect, as many of these subthemes have, but the idea also reflected a will to do right by others. These participants whose interviews contained

threads of this subtheme were insistent that their religion guided them to respect of others as a foundational principle, and to act in another way would be to act against God, which very strongly ties into the content of section 3.3.2. One participant explained how they would want to be viewed without prior judgment and how they attempted to reflect that in their interactions with others, including those of the LGBTQ+ community:

The idea of respecting different identities whether you accept it or not is fundamental. Like for me believing in my religion, I'm not going to expect people to understand why I think what I believe but it's also not an invitation to assume things about me. You believe in what you want to believe in, you do what you want to do, and I'm not going to call you out on that.

For this participant, who identified as Muslim, non-judgment meant not assuming others' behaviors to be good or bad based on a limited perspective. This participant reflected on how difficult it was existing as a Muslim person in the United States, especially after the rampant rise of Islamophobia in the last 25 years, and how they never wished to inflict that kind of pain on someone else. To them, non-judgment was an act of hope. Non-judgment was an act of resisting stereotypes and assumptions to be kind to others, a sentiment reflected directly in another Muslim participant's interview:

To push my ideals and my beliefs onto someone else who doesn't believe in them, I think that's bigotry. And we have been fighting people doing that to us for decades, and to be a part of a religion that promotes community, that promotes acceptance, that promotes peace, and then go directly against that I think is counterintuitive. Like, if you want to show people how beautiful this religion is, then it has to come from you.

To both of these participants, non-judgment represents a wish they have about how they wish to be treated, and both indicated that they believed this is what their religion called them to do. While other participants from both Jewish and Christian backgrounds echoed a similar sentiment, these quotes provided the most pointed examples of how this principle was exemplified in the interview responses.

3.3.4 Honestly, Who Cares?

This sentiment of not caring if someone is queer often came up in conjunction with another subtheme of non-judgement; if someone “didn’t care,” it often stemmed from a belief that they would not want to be judged that way, or that it was between that queer person and God, or that to love someone as God commanded was to not question or care about what they did in the privacy of their own relationships. However, this theme emerged in enough interviews to warrant its own subsection talking about the idea of “not caring.”

This sentiment was often expressed by participants using the phrase “minding my own business,” which was often used to convey a belief that it was better to make sure they themselves were following the rules of God or one’s religion rather than policing others’ behavior. An example of the use of this phrase could be found in the words of one Muslim participant when they were asked if they had an opinion on LGBTQ+ people:

I don’t think I’m allowed to have a position on LGBTQ+ people honestly. They are just people, and everybody needs to mind their own business a little bit more.

When this participant was speaking, it was said with almost a tone of exasperation; they were frustrated that people were more concerned with the behavior of others than with their own

misdeeds. This participant, along with many others, expressed a belief that it was better to work towards sinlessness internally than it was to restrict the behavior of others. This sentiment often came with a statement of blanket culpability in sin; “We all sin to one extent or another, right? No one here is perfect,” claimed one participant. Not caring whether someone sinned often came with the belief that because everyone sinned at some point or another, human beings were not fit to be qualified or just judges. As one participant put it, human beings were not inherently righteous and therefore could not be judges of what righteousness was (see section 4.1 for more on this quote and non-judgment from a conservative lens).

The only time many participants said they cared about someone’s behavior was if harm was being done. One participant stated that “[a]s long as I’m not causing harm to anyone and no one else is causing harm, I see no reason to do anything about it.” As long as no one was being harmed, participants said that it really wasn’t their place to intervene nor did they feel compelled to do anything. If harm was being done, such as in the case of non-consensual behaviors like sexual harassment, then that was the only time participants felt as though it was necessary to intervene. Otherwise, they simply didn’t care. As one participant put it, “I highly doubt God cares who you like in your free time, so why should I?”

The only other situation in which participants felt as though someone’s sexuality or gender identity was their business was for “context”. When asked what one participant meant by their use of the word context, they explained that to them, “queer people are just people. The only reason the word queer is important to use is only so you don’t minimize the struggles that they’ve had, the prejudice they face in society.” This participant came from a minoritized religion, Islam, and mentioned on several occasions the shared nature of oppression between Muslim people and queer people (see section 3.4.3.1). To know someone as queer, this participant argued, was only

important in the way that knowing someone as Muslim was important; the knowledge provides context for understanding their behaviors and supporting them as members of a shared community. Other than for context, the identity did not matter to them. They simply “didn’t care” beyond that.

3.4 Challenges of Explaining One’s Views: Intra- and Inter-faith Dialogues on the LGBTQ+

The final theme from the interviews that this thesis will analyze is the idea that having inter-faith (between people of different religions or beliefs) and intra-faith (between people of the same/similar religion or belief) dialogues on LGBTQ+ issues are both incredibly difficult. While this section does not cover every challenge and problem that participants mentioned in the course of their interviews, it will endeavor to explore the most common ideas on why faith-based conversations on LGBTQ+ issues are so difficult. Faith-based disagreements, assumptions about religion by LGBTQ+ communities, and the ambiguity of where faith-based homophobia arises all lead to a culture of confusion, anger, and fear when it comes to discussing LGBTQ+ issues through a religious lens.

3.4.1 The Difficulty of Faith-Based Disagreements on LGBTQ+ Issues

When asked about their experiences discussing LGBTQ+ issues in a religious context, no participants provided a positive example of a conversation they felt occurred with minimal resistance. While some were able to provide an example of a time where coming out went better

than expected or where someone learned something and listened empathetically, these stories were rare. Instead, participants were usually only able to provide negative examples if they had any experience at all. Some participants stated that they had never had conversations on LGBTQ+ issues with members of their faith group, and it was usually because of one of two reasons; it either was never discussed because LGBTQ+ people were actively treated as nonexistent by members of their faith community, or the participant did not bring it up intentionally so as to avoid an argument. “I don’t want them to say something that I disagree with so fundamentally,” one participant shared after explaining that they had never talked about LGBTQ+ issues with other Muslims. Another highlighted the major cultural differences evident between their religion’s culture in the United States versus abroad:

It’s not something that’s commonly talked about, and I think that’s because it’s a Western society thing. Not necessarily that it’s only prominent in Western society, but there’s this idea that you can’t be out or LGBTQ+ in countries like Qatar or Iraq, especially in the wake of the World Cup [in Qatar].

This participant stated that while they know LGBTQ+ issues are talked about in all countries, this stigma around acknowledging LGBTQ+ people remained prevalent in their religion’s culture, even if secular media in countries like the United States encouraged discussion on the topic. They described researching LGBTQ+ issues in Islam before our discussion because they had never had exposure to that discussion before being prompted to do so. These topics were not discussed frequently enough for this participant to claim a religious stance, but they described how they had seen religion and culture intertwine in the treatment of *hijras*, an umbrella term that refers to a gender minority group in the Indian sub-continent that uses neither male nor female pronouns (Al-Mamun et. al 2022): “It’s not necessarily that [hijras] are accepted, but there is an acknowledgment

of them, whereas with same-sex relationships, there's little acknowledgment." Here, the participant provides a unique example of cultural and religious stigma overlapping and creating a system that incorporates queer identities into the social structure without offering these minority groups full social support.

When people in power do begin to make changes towards tolerance for LGBTQ+ identity, such as India's supreme court case in 2014 that legally recognized hijras as a third gender (Associated Press in New Delhi), there is often severe social pushback that makes discussions on these matters all the more difficult. Christian participants remarked on a similar struggle as the current Pope makes efforts towards including LGBTQ+ people into religion, offering blessings for same-sex unions and baptisms for transgender people (Horowitz et. al 2023). "Oftentimes, the Pope receives backlash from conservative members of the church for asking in calls for kindness and inclusivity, and that does not make me proud to be Catholic," one participant remarked. This backlash has caused severe division both within and outside the Catholic church. One participant remarked on the frustration they felt in the wake of major backlash to inclusion and how it often left a bad impression on those who are not Catholics:

I think that Catholics are seen more as a monolith by outside viewers. I mean, I know that every Catholic has different beliefs and interpretations, but the public views us as a monolith and it can make talking about these things more difficult.

While members of these religions recognize that these debates are rampant in religious communities, participants believe that those outside of their religion think of them as a cultural monolith, which is not entirely based in speculation. During the course of these interviews, several participants made comments that erred on the side of presumptuous; whether it was about a different denomination of the same religion, such as a comment made about Catholicism by a

Protestant, or about a different religion all together, several participants shared generalizations about those in religious communities, despite being a part of a religious community themselves. While some participants stated that these generalizations were based primarily in personal experience, these generalizations could lean periodically into the stereotypical. Such stereotyping practices, while potentially based in some form of truth, ultimately leads to more animosity on the subject of religion and LGBTQ+ issues, making the subject in turn harder to discuss.

3.4.2 Where to Focus the Discussion: Is Perception of LGBTQ+ Issues Within Faith Communities Based in Text or Culture?

“There’s a very fine line between culture and religion in every society, I think,” Participant 11 stated after talking about stereotypes of the Muslim community. The question of whether homophobia in religious spaces is based on a religious text or on culture was asked in every interview, and this quote highlights the dynamic between religion and culture that defines the modern debate over LGBTQ+ issues. Is homophobia in religious communities strictly text-based? Is it exclusively a cultural problem? As Participant 11 highlights, the line between religion and culture is often quite blurred, yet there do seem to be some common understandings as to the difference between strictly religious rules and cultural norms. Participants were often quick to highlight textual evidence for restrictions on LGBTQ+ behavior, citing the story of Adam and Eve or the verses in the Book of Leviticus as the driving force for more restrictive interpretations of their religions, but they were also rarely willing to say that anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric was entirely text or religion-based. “I think it ties back to the Torah, but [the view of LGBTQ issues] changes as the times and culture change,” said one participant. As time moves forward, cultural forces push

religions to adapt their rules, which in turn changes the culture, which creates a situation in which culture and religion are inseparable; the religion is a part of the broader culture of a people, and the broader culture is a fundamental part of the religion.

This push and pull between religion and culture can lead to both accepting and restrictive outcomes. One participant highlighted that the sin of homosexuality was actually not that high in the list of priority sins, and it was only elevated into a what the participant called a “Thou Shalt Not” sin after anti-LGBTQ cultural pressures focused on it. When discussing Christianity’s focus on LGBTQ+ issues in recent years, one participant remarked that they thought “that people use the Bible as an excuse to condemn homosexuality.” People, or the culture that surrounds a given religious institution, take lines out of context, in this participant’s opinion, in order to minoritize and ostracize an entire community. Another participant was discussing a similar trend in Muslim religious communities and said:

There are texts that have been interpreted in certain ways by different scholars that give one indication or another, but at the end of the day, the discrimination that’s there? That’s a social issue. The religion does not teach discrimination. It can say what it considers right or what it considers wrong. It considers smoking wrong. It considers drinking wrong. But that’s also an interpretation of the fact that those are harmful for your health. So when it comes to that, the choice to discriminate against someone based on their identity is very culturally based, very individually based. And to associate that with the religion is harmful towards that religion and the relationship that society has with that religion.

This participant mentions at the end of their quote an example of the cyclical nature of religion and culture. The elders and text of the religion dictates what it believes is right or wrong, which encourages the broader culture to adopt a prejudice against what is wrong, yet if those religious

leaders decide that something liked by the public is wrong (like drinking in this example), this can deeply affect how the people of that religion come to view that religious institution: not as something with moral authority so much as an out-of-touch institution at best or an actively harmful group at worst.

Participants each had their own perception of the meaning of religious leadership and who heads the religion. This discussion of religious authority was one of the few prominent distinctions between Protestant and Catholic respondents. While many of the other themes and discussions in this thesis were relatively universal within Christian participants' responses, the idea of "who leads the church" was a moment where respondents of both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds mentioned the other. One Protestant respondent explained that they conceptualized the church as different from religion itself, with the church being the culture or community within congregations and denominations, while the religion was "exactly what was in the Bible and no more." They went on to explain that they saw this distinction most clearly in the Catholic church. While the participant themselves was not Catholic, they conceived of the church of Catholicism to be centered on the religious authority of the Pope, despite the participant's firm belief that "the Pope is not God and should not be thought of as God." While this participant understood the Pope from an outsider perspective to be an absolute moral authority for Catholics, Catholic respondents themselves often declared a belief that the Pope was akin more to a moral guide stone as opposed to an absolute authority on matters of religion. While the Pope was certainly a large part of these Catholic participants' understandings of who set the rules for the religion, the Pope was a guide for congregations and churches on how to act rather than an absolute autocrat on the meanings of holy scripture.

These divides in culture and religious understandings often have to do with regional differences, some participants argue. Religious opinions can depend on what country, or even what state, one finds themselves in. One participant explained that in their denomination of Christianity, there was a large divide in how churches in the north of the United States viewed LGBTQ+ issues versus those in the South, though they admitted that LGBTQ+ acceptance was largely dependent on the priest's disposition. Another student who identified as Muslim explained that certain countries under Islamic or Sharia law refused to acknowledge LGBTQ+ issues out of a lack of willingness to discuss the issue (see section 3.4.1), but this student stressed the idea that "it's important to know that the holy book does fully acknowledge LGBTQ+ people, but I think that it's culture that makes leaders of the country not even acknowledge LGBTQ+ people." This student also highlighted that certain religious communities kept this culture of minimal acknowledgement, despite being located in a country where LGBTQ+ issues were more openly discussed, due to histories of shame, punishment, and fear surrounding the issue.

While participants often differed on their exact breakdown of the interplay between culture and religious text, most agreed that there was significant overlap between the rules of a religion and the culture of its followers. This blurred distinction can make these conversations of faith and LGBTQ+ issues all the more difficult, leading to less public will for discourse on these topics.

3.4.3 A Barrier of Faith: Talking to LGBTQ+ People as a Religious Person

This topic of interaction with LGBTQ+ people was not a part of the original scope of this study, but many participants brought up their experiences interacting with queer people, and the answers participants gave began to shape the beginnings of a subtopic on how religion is perceived

by the LGBTQ+ community. I added the question on how religious identity is perceived in LGBTQ+ spaces to the interview script (see Appendix), as a follow-up to an errant comment. This addition to the questions produced a litany of differing responses, but many were similar in tone and focus.

3.4.3.1 Empathy in the Face of Stigma

Often, participants noted a stigma around religion as something that is inherently anti-LGBTQ while also expressing compassion and empathy for those in the queer community who had been harmed by religious systems. When asked if LGBTQ+ people come with assumptions about their religious identity, Participant 6 said “I think most members of the queer community try to stay away from religion just because of the stigma that is around it, and I don’t fault them for it,” adding that they hoped that queer people would “have the same level of openness that I have towards them.” Another participant of Catholic faith added “I’m lucky not to have that kind of trauma, but I recognize that the church has caused a lot of harm.” Similar sentiments of both stigma around religion from queer communities and empathy towards queer people with religious trauma echoed in interviews across all three Abrahamic religions and all political parties.

When Participant 2 reflected on interactions with LGBTQ+ people, they emphasized the importance of empathy for those with religious trauma or those who are in a crisis of faith, arguing “to love somebody is such a beautiful thing, and me personally, I can never tell somebody to not love someone. That seems like the most heartbreaking thing in the world, and I think a lot of people could stand to acknowledge how heartbreaking that is.” Participant 2 then went on to explain that while Islam “is not the most comforting of religions for LGBTQ+ people,” there is always a way to deal with LGBTQ+ people in an empathetic and caring way, a belief that Participant 2 believed

could be more universal in the Muslim community. This empathy, to many participants, is even more vital when LGBTQ+ people act in ways antagonistic towards religious beliefs. Participant 8 explained this concept in detail, saying:

I don't love when people act in ways that they know are specifically contrary to Catholic beliefs just for spite, but I don't take it too personally because the Catholic church has caused them harm. I don't feel the need to say I'm being persecuted, because the church hasn't been great to them.

When asked about what they meant by acting in ways contrary to Catholic belief, Participant 8 told a story about an ex-Catholic friend of theirs who ate meat on the Fridays of Lent specifically because Christian practice had told them they were prohibited from it. This act of brazen defiance did not cause Participant 8 to feel any anger, they recounted, because "the church has caused them a lot of harm." The only act Participant 8 did not understand was the idea of a sexy nun costume, but Participant 8 just elected to steer clear of the subject so as to not cause more undue harm to members of the LGBTQ+ community. In a way, this empathy reflects a sentiment from section 3.1; religious people, across all faiths, incorporate empathetic practices into their interactions with LGBTQ+ people in order to undue some of the stereotypes that many queer people have of religion.

These stereotypes of religious people that queer communities carry include, according to participants, an idea of a modestly or traditionally clothed person who carries anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in their beliefs. Many participants described the ways in which the way they dressed or spoke or practiced religion carried negative connotations in regards to how they viewed LGBTQ+ people. "People assume I'm a staunch Mormon because I have really long hair and dress modestly, so whenever I mention my friend who uses they/them pronouns, it's like a blue screen moment,"

Participant 8 joked, referencing the moment a computer quits functioning and processing information. Participant 8 went on to explain that for them, modesty was a personal journey with God, but that people, both LGBTQ+ and not, associated it with “a hard stick religion that forces women into certain clothes or conservative politics,” neither of which Participant 8 believes describes their religion or politics.

They went on to share the converse of that situation, where people know their political ideology and become shocked when learning that they are religious. This conflation of modesty, religion, and politics leads to assumptions that are false, yet Participant 8 does not fault them for assuming these things. Participants expressed their concern around harsh stereotypes like this being pushed both by individuals and larger media apparatuses, with some finding it ultimately more damaging to the people to whom religion has caused harm. Participants expressed concern that if religion remains associated with harsh rules and limited acceptance, both religious and queer communities end up losing valuable members by forcing them to choose one identity over another.

Two participants took this concept a step further; both come from minoritized religious identities and both expressed how solidarity between minoritized religions and queer communities can be vital for the advancement of human rights, with one participant stating that the bond is over a shared “minoritized identity where you treat people how you want to be treated. You realize how unfairly you are [both] treated as a minoritized person.” This perceived bond can quickly be betrayed, however, as Participant 6 explains:

It hurts a lot when people aren't willing to stand up against oppression of a certain group, simply because they think they have laws or prejudice against queer people. There are Muslims that are gay, there are Muslims that are bi, there are Muslims that are trans, and

then to minimize their identities and say that oppression and genocide are okay for an entire group of people? Because their government doesn't support something?

The bond that is believed to be there can quickly be shattered by the stereotype of a hateful religious person, which participants say only fuels the cycle of perceived hatred between religious communities and queer communities. While many participants found the stereotypes a sort of obstacle to overcome or a simple fact of the oppressive nature of religious trauma, this stereotype of religious animosity can quickly lead to dire effects for those in either or both communities and the continuing of traumatic relationships between faith and sexuality.

With so much on the line in communicating with LGBTQ+ people as religious people, participants cited a belief that churches, mosques, and synagogues needed to be doing more to combat the rampant stereotype of anti-LGBTQ religion. One participant, a Jewish trans person, advocated for this kind of active role for religious communities by saying “since religious communities appear to be inherently anti-LGBTQ+, our religious communities need to do more work to show that they’re not.” The work falls, according to most participants, on the shoulders of religious communities to undo the centuries of religious trauma built in queer communities. While communication across this trauma rift may not be easy and may require a radical amount of empathy, most participants agree that it is the preferred strategy for combatting histories of oppression. Atonement and reparations, they argue, are the only ways that the rift between religion and LGBTQ+ identity can begin to close.

4.0 The Conservative Few: A Glance at the Young Political Right

Of the 15 participants in this study, no one stated explicitly that they were a Republican and only two stated that they felt that “conservative” or “right-leaning” described their political ideology. This is reflective of an overall trend in higher education; Americans have shown a growing belief that conservative voices are less able to share their political perspectives on college campuses. According to a recent AP-NORC/UChicago poll, “47% of adults say liberals have “a lot” of freedom to express their views on college campuses, while just 20% said the same of conservatives,” (Binkley et al. 2023). While this statistic does not indicate that conservatives are being willfully and actively censored on campus, it does indicate that Americans on average believe that conservative view points are less accepted on college campuses. This perception then most likely shaped who volunteered to be a part of this study. The flyer and study description explicitly named the goal of the research being to study how religious students view LGBTQ+ issues. Since LGBTQ+ issues are a currently divisive subject for those across the political spectrum, it is very likely that students with more conservative view points opted out of participating in the study for fear of being judged or being a minority opinion.

4.1 The Idea of Non-Judgment: A Reconstruction Through a Conservative Lens

Of the two participants who identify as conservative, one stated that neither they nor the people they associate with openly identify as LGBTQ+, and the other stated that a fair amount of

the people they associate with identify as LGBTQ+, saying “I actually have a lot of gay friends, now that I think about it, but I tend to avoid the topic [of LGBTQ+ issues] with them.” Both participants identified as Christian, with one participant identifying themselves as Catholic and the other stating that they came from a Southern-Baptist background. When talking about their Christianity and its effect on the way people perceive them, the participant who identified as Catholic, Participant 7, stated “I think a lot of people assume that because I’m Catholic, I automatically judge LGBTQ+ people. I don’t think it’s any of my business as long as I’m not being harmed.” This theme of non-judgment (see section 3.3) was prevalent in both participants’ interviews, yet each participant had their own perspective on what non-judgment. The participant who was raised in the Southern Baptist church, Participant 10, explained that “[a]s Christians, we are called to love thy neighbor as thyself. So we should never treat LGBTQ+ people differently, especially if they are not Christian.” Participant 10 then went on to explain that they felt a distinction in how they treated LGBTQ+ non-Christians versus Christians, saying “You can’t expect non-Christians to abide by Christian morals. It’s a bit different if they are LGBTQ+ and Christian, because then it’s more about their faith and I’m not supposed to judge them for that.” Here, it is evident that Participant 10 values non-judgment, yet they carry that belief differently based on the other identities of the person. This difference in treatment of religious and non-religious queer people was seen in other interviews across the political spectrum with Participant 2, a self-identified left-leaning Muslim, describing how faith is simply a part of the context that they grapple with when talking to LGBTQ+ people. In their interview, Participant 2 described situations where the religious community can be quick to judge members of the LGBTQ+ community:

There are a lot of queer Muslims, and I think that they more than anything need our support than our resistance. People are very quick to judge and cast [queer Muslims] out of the Muslim community, but if anything if [a queer person] is holding on closer to Islam and they are dealing with something that they are struggling with or trying to appreciate in their life that doesn't fit the mold of what a perfect Muslim is, I think we should hold them tighter, [not push them away].

Non-judgment here is even more essential for Participant 2 when dealing with religious members of the LGBTQ+ community; to judge and potentially push them away from God would be a grave sin, according to Participant 2, and holding onto the community given by religion (see Section 3.2) is essential for a holistically religious life. Participant 2 then went on to explain that “[e]ven though [my] religion is not necessarily a comforting one for queer people, I think that you as a human can make space for them in your life.” Similarly to Participant 10, Participant 2 expressed a belief that queer people should be allowed into religious spaces as a function of non-judgment. Both Participants 2 and 10 expressed that they believed preventing someone from engaging with God and the religious community would not be in accordance with their religion, whether that be Christianity for Participant 10 or Islam for Participant 2.

When asked to express their beliefs on the LGBTQ+ community, Participant 7 said that they did not know enough to decide whether homosexuality or trans identity was a sin. Participant 7 simply referred back to the idea that they shouldn't judge, and emphasized that as long as no one was being harmed by their behavior, it was none of their business. Participant 10, however, stated that “being gay or trans is a sin, and I fully believe that,” while still asserting that it was not their place to judge. When asked to elaborate, Participant 10 cited the Bible as a text with various verses,

such as in the books of Leviticus and Romans, that guided their belief on homosexual activity.

Participant 10 also had this to say about trans and gender non-conforming individuals:

It doesn't so directly say it, but for trans issues, to me God created you one way and you believe you are a different way. And I believe that they have those feelings and beliefs, I do, but then to say God made a mistake in my design? To me, saying the creator of the universe made a mistake is more where the sin is. It's not necessarily changing your body or gender so much as saying the Creator made a mistake.

While their belief on same-sex relationships is that the sin is the actual act, such as having queer sex, the sin in trans identity is found in the questioning of God's will. Participant 10 explained that their faith as a Southern Baptist did not exclude those who were not Baptist from going to Heaven, and they believed that the way to gain entrance to Heaven was through true and genuine faith in God. "You cannot save yourself," Participant 10 explained. "Jesus dying on the cross saved you." God, according to Participant 10, is far above man, Earth, and church; God's will is what shapes the universe and saves souls from damnation. In other words, to try and live a life different from what God gives you or calls you to do is to defy God's will and his gift of salvation. Thus, their interpretation of trans identity; if the way to living a good life is through genuine faith in God, questioning God's will is, in that moment, not having true faith in God, and changing the body that is God-given, in Participant 10's position, is to directly defy the will of God.

For Participant 10, even though they personally believe that "being gay or trans is a sin," they find that the way certain church members approach the issue directly contradicts this Christian principle of non-judgment. "I don't agree with how the church chooses to handle [LGBTQ+ issues]," they said. Participant 10 described a situation in their home church where someone they knew personally came out as a lesbian yet still chose to attend the church, and Participant 10

recounted that “some church members found out and went to the deacon, and it was just to cause a scene,” Participant 10 explained. “I don’t think that’s right,” Participant 10 continued; “We have teen moms in our church, and no one is yelling at them. [...] So I don’t agree [with people in the church who] pinpoint that topic. I’m not going to Heaven because I’m straight, so no one is going to Hell because they are gay.” To Participant 10, no sin seemed greater than another, and it was not their place to condemn someone to Hell for being gay. When asked how they think the situation should have been approached, Participant 10 said:

I think knowing the person first is important. Get to know them, and show the genuine love that we are supposed to have to that person. You cannot convict them; that is not our job. That is God’s job, so know that they obviously want to learn if they are in the church and that God will take care of it. He can work through you, but not if you are working through you.

This belief in the importance of knowing someone and engaging without judgment was reflected in Participant 7’s interview as well. When discussing the future of the Christian religion, Participant 7 said “I think with it becoming a lot more mainstream now, it’s harder to hate people. It’s much easier to hate people that you don’t know.” This idea that it’s easier to live out the Christian maxim to not condemn others when someone consistently engages with LGBTQ+ people was reflected directly in the interview of Participant 8, a self-identified Catholic leftist, stating “It’s easy to be hateful when someone is telling you to go hate them. [...] It’s hard to look at someone and tell them you hate them, especially when they are sitting next to you in a pew.” While Participant 7, Participant 10, and Participant 8 may have disagreed on the particulars of acceptance for LGBTQ+ people in a Christian context, or whether homosexuality was a sin at all, they all

shared a similar belief that the only way to challenge hate and show love in a Christian manner is to truly get to know those who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

When recounting this incident at their home church, Participant 10 brought up another key theme that showed up in many interviews, including both of the conservative participants' interviews: "Everyone in that church is a sinner," Participant 10 stated, "like for all have sinned and fall short in the glory of God." Participant 7 also referenced the Christian concept that everyone is a sinner and thus cannot judge others through mentioning a parable from the book of John in the Bible. The story Participant 7 referenced was from John 8:3-11, which reads:

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

This story from the time of Jesus is often referenced in modern Christian articles and discussions in forums from the website "Got Questions?" to a discussion blog on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) website. This page of text from John is often the basis for the Christian belief that it is wrong or sinful to judge someone else for their sins simply because everyone has sinned.

Participant 7 and Participant 10 both expressed a belief that it is wrong to judge someone else's sins because humans are not "righteous judges," as Participant 10 explained. Humans have all sinned at one point or another, they argue, and thus humans cannot be fair and just in their judgment. Instead, any judgments that may be made by humans can simply be seen as a form of psychological projection—"when an individual unconsciously projects their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors onto someone else" (French 2023). Any human has, in this line of logic, sinned and they project their guilt about sinning or their sinful behavior onto someone else to avoid confronting this feeling or truth. Thus, humans cannot fundamentally be unbiased nor truthful in their judgments.

4.2 The Idea of Homophobia: A Specter of Presumed Hate

Finally, when asked if there was anything else they wanted to say on the topic of LGBTQ+ issues and religion, Participant 10 stated that they wanted to say something but were not sure how to word it. After a moment's pause, Participant 10 chose to address the issue and concept of homophobia, stating:

"I kind of want to make this statement: I can see how people take what I say as homophobic, but I just want to clarify that if there are non-Christians who are gay and living their truth, I truly don't care. I can't hold people to that standard, and being gay does not make me hate you. I know it comes off that way, but it does not make me hate the person."

Participant 10 then elaborated on the issue of homophobia, explaining that homophobia, in their view, was a form of hatred for the LGBTQ+ community, and that is not what they felt. Many of

their close friends were LGBTQ, and Participant 10 felt that while conversations on religion and LGBTQ+ issues were difficult, “it didn’t stop our friendship.” Participant 10 knew that these conversations caused their friends to feel hurt, which they understood and had endeavored to avoid. Many of these friends are non-Christian, which Participant 10 said allowed them to contextualize their friends’ responses to Participant 10’s beliefs: “I [...] can’t deny that if you don’t see it as God’s word, it holds no meaning to you, and that’s ok.” In their view, Participant 10’s Christianity was a belief that did not compel them to try and convince others of the sinfulness of certain behaviors; it was certainly not a topic about which they would lie, but to Participant 10 there was no hate or judgment behind their beliefs. While their beliefs were certainly more conservative than other participants of this study, this principle of non-judgment is something that was found across all interviews of different faiths, denominations, and political ideologies. The United States of America may be living in an increasingly divided political and ideological landscape, but the youngest generation of religious voters, at least according to this sample study, is fundamentally united in the belief that it is not the place of any person to judge or critique how someone else chooses to engage with their sexuality or gender.

5.0 Considering Those Who Are Both Religious and Queer

In this pool of 15 participants, six of them identified as LGBTQ+ themselves. None of the Muslim participants identified as LGBTQ+, which provides a lack of perspective that would be an area for future research. Of those that identified as LGBTQ+, two were Christian and four were Jewish. This section will focus on these six participants as a compelling example of how different perspectives on religion and the LGBTQ+ community manifest in the lives of those who hold both identities.

5.1 Being Religious in LGBTQ+ Spaces

This topic of inquiry was not in the original script for the interview. While it was not in the initial research scope, the topic of interacting with LGBTQ+ people as religious students provided a compelling foil for section 5.2, the section that examines participant's experiences in religious spaces as an LGBTQ+ person. I asked what the reaction was of LGBTQ+ people to discovering the participants' religious identity, all stated that there was a definite stigma. As examined in 3.4.3, several participants stated that religious identity often came with an assumption of prejudice or homophobia, but participants also empathized with these concerns since many religious organizations, especially those affiliated with Christianity, were outwardly hateful towards queer identity. For queer participants, however, this assumption often came with an emotional weight of

guilt for identifying as religious despite the harm done to queer communities by members of their religion. One participant explained it like this:

It sometimes feels that queer people expect you to either be religious or LGBTQ+. As someone who is both, that can be very hard to navigate. It sometimes feels like it's easier to enter a religious space and be both than it is to enter LGBTQ+ spaces. And there is a very valid fear of religion in queer spaces, but I like being able to enter Jewish spaces without feeling like I have to apologize for what others do in the name of my religion.

For this participant, the stigma around being Jewish often felt overwhelming and exclusionary, despite rhetoric from these communities that preached acceptance for all, antisemitism is felt. As one participant stated, "you go into queer spaces and you are all queer, but there's that added layer of being Jewish." This sentiment of overwhelming stigma around Judaism and Jewish identity was echoed by several other participants, with one explaining the sometimes counterintuitive experiences they had as part of their exposure to both Jewish and LGBTQ+ spaces:

Instead of explaining LGBTQ political ideology to Jews, I find myself explaining Jewish identity to LGBTQ people. I identify primarily as a leftist, and most of my friends are leftist queers, and I do sometimes find myself explaining what it's like to be an observant Jew. I find that there's more understanding of LGBTQ issues within Judaism than there is understanding of Judaism within LGBTQ spaces.

For those who held both Jewish and queer identities, religious spaces often offered more solace from stigma than LGBTQ+ spaces. This experience was not universal, with Christian participants often expressing a complete reversal of this sentiment of solace in religious spaces, but the idea of anti-religious stigma was not a rare theme in the research interviews for both Christian and Jewish participants. Anti-Semitic micro-aggressions were, however, far more prevalent in the interviews

of Jewish participants, with them recalling invasive questions or assumptions based on their self-identification as religious. One Jewish participant recalled these assumptions being made in both queer and non-queer spaces:

Some people who are no longer my friends kept asking why Jewish people weren't homophobic. We both had "The Old Testament", which I mean to us isn't even "The Old Testament" but that's how they put it, so they wanted to know why I didn't think that being gay was a sin. They were both Catholic and assumed that I would be homophobic too just because a few lines of text said so. And queer people sometimes make the same assumption, especially if they are ex-Christian.

Many participants expressed frustration at the fact that their identities were not being equally respected by those who expressed sentiments of acceptance, yet many also held hope for a future in which religion and LGBTQ+ identity could coexist in the queer community. "I'd really appreciate if queer spaces tried to make space for those in the community who identify as religious," one Jewish participant said, adding that there was already copious amounts of anti-Semitic bias outside of these queer community spaces without the added anxiety of bias within minoritized groups. The need for community, as mentioned in section 3.2, was overshadowed, according to participants, by the fear that religious identity would create another barrier towards acceptance.

5.2 Being LGBTQ+ In Religious Spaces

As was mentioned in the last section, there were varying perspectives among the participants on the comfort of being queer in religious spaces. Two participants, without being intentionally led, expressed direct contradictions in their experiences with being queer in religious communities. One participant expressed feelings of acceptance and comfort in religious events and spaces, as well as a belief that entering LGBTQ+ spaces as a religious person was more challenging to them. Another participant stated that they had been raised in a religious community that was not LGBTQ+-accepting, leading to years of both internalized and external homophobia and fear, and this participant believed that entering religious spaces now as an adult was far harder for them than entering queer spaces due to a continued fear of religion-based homophobia and violence. This section will explore both how LGBTQ+ people experience homophobia and acceptance in religious spaces, with an understanding that both can exist simultaneously, as many participants attested.

5.2.1 Homophobia in Religious Spaces

Homophobia manifests itself in a variety of ways in religious spaces, according to participants. One participant in particular was raised in a family where some relatives were Christian and others were Jewish, and they found a large distinction in how homophobia manifested itself in the minds of each religions' practitioners. This participant stated that the acceptance varied in relatives of both religions, but as a whole they found that Jewish people were far more accepting of their LGBTQ+ identity. They, as a Jewish person, found their Christian (of

which denomination they did not specify) family's reactions particularly confusing, as exemplified in this quote:

I think that Christians, they have been quicker to point to a Bible quote and say “nope!” Which, as someone who is not Christian, the theological argument makes less sense to use on me. But I think that kind of speaks to how deeply entrenched homophobia is for some people.

This participant was quick to explain that this was by no means an infallible rule; several Jewish family members were less accepting than they had hoped, and other Christian family members were affirming of their LGBTQ+ identity quickly. Even with its more liberal denominations and the work of specifically Protestant churches to accept LGBTQ+ identity, Christianity as a whole, especially more conservative denominations such as Mormonism and Evangelism, was identified by many participants as appearing to be a more volatile landscape for LGBTQ+ existence than other religions such as Judaism or Atheism. Participants often noted that this blanket statement of Christianity being more homophobic than other religions was not universal, with participants of both Jewish and Christian backgrounds expressing belief that a lot of the variation in acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues was based within each congregation rather than a generalized idea. The participant mentioned in the introduction to section 5.2 was raised Catholic and remarked several times on the varying levels of acceptance they experienced as they attempted to find a new denomination. Other participants mentioned a similar trend of wide variance in acceptance based on congregation. Members of both Jewish and Christian faith shared experiences with variance on LGBTQ+ acceptance, even when they were comparing churches and synagogues of the same denomination.

Some of this variance was explained by one participant who had seen differences in how different members of the LGBTQ+ community were treated. They stated that:

I think it tends to be that the more closely you align with the cis-het expectation, the more likely you are to be accepted in most communities. People who are not cis tend to get a little more resistance in part because if you're someone who is gay or lesbian and not with someone, it's a little easier for people to pretend that they don't see it, whereas if you're a trans person, especially since certain clothing is gendered, you get a little more of that pushback. But I think for the most part, there hasn't been much either in my experience.

Acceptance was dependent on the ability to “pass” or be mistaken for cis-het (cisgender/heterosexual), a sentiment echoed across a few different interviews. If someone was single or cisgender, they were less visibly queer and thus received less of the brunt of homophobia in these religious communities. Homophobia, according to participants, was a part of the religious landscape regardless of denomination, yet there was a wide variety in the amount of homophobia in religious groups that was contingent on many factors, such as community demographics, political ideology, and which religion the group practiced.

5.2.2 The Flipside: Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Identity in Religion

While homophobia in religious spaces was a common sentiment in the interviews with LGBTQ+ religious people, there were also several examples of inclusion in religious spaces that LGBTQ+ participants had witnessed. When recounting experiences in synagogues and churches, many participants were able to list ways in which they had seen progress towards LGBTQ+ inclusion. Groups like Keshet, an advocacy group that works towards “full equality of all LGBTQ

Jews” (2024) according to their website, were named as examples of the progress being made in religious communities. Other organizations, such as Eshel who work to support “LGBTQ Orthodox Jews” (Eshel Online), and accepting congregations, such as the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) that work to help queer Christians “re-discove[r] and [re-claim] their identity and worth as people of faith” (About MCC), were often referenced by participants in general statements of their belief that more affirming congregations and community groups were becoming visible and accepted in the larger religious communities. These groups, along with individual synagogues and advocates, helped to support gender-nonconforming people through actions like providing gender-neutral language for certain Hebrew prayers and advocating for the use of gender-neutral language in Jewish spaces. Participants did say that these inclusionary efforts only went as far as individual synagogues were willing to adopt them, but many participants of both Jewish and Christian faith had mentioned the growing support of congregation members, religious leaders, and faith-based groups for LGBTQ+ people as time progressed.

While the movement towards LGBTQ+ inclusion was not nearly as quick as they may have liked, participants expressed hope for the future of inclusion, especially as members of their age demographic began to step into roles of religious leadership. When talking about religious events held by campus religious organizations, one Jewish participant expressed their thankfulness for the inclusive nature of these events. This participant identifies as transgender and described their experience wearing certain gendered clothing pieces, such as a kippah, for the first time. This simple act of donning a kippah provided them with both a sense of gender affirmation and a feeling of belonging in religious spaces that had not existed before their transition. For them, the community of college-aged Jewish students had provided a safe and accepting space to live their life as a trans Jewish person more authentically. While not every space had been accepting to the

LGBTQ+ participants interviewed, several were able to cite similar moments of affirmation of their queer identity in religious spaces, and many were made possible by their access to a religious space with other young people. Participants of both faiths were able to point to moments during their time in college that had allowed them to explore both their faith and queer identities without fear of ridicule, a sentiment reflective of the use of community as a tool for emotional and mental well-being named in section 3.2.2. While many of the participants named in section 3.2.2 were not LGBTQ+, they still identified as members of minoritized religions. As one non-LGBTQ+ participant explained, there is a shared identity in the fact that both religious minorities and queer people are consistently minoritized and victimized. Thus, both groups crave a sense of community founded in shared identity, and to deny someone that sense of community because of exclusionary practices like homophobia is detrimental to their well-being (see section 3.2.3).

5.3 How Queer Jewish People Conceptualize Religion and Faith

During the course of the interviews with LGBTQ+ religious students, a new thread of inquiry came to light within the subset of participants that identified as both Jewish and LGBTQ+. When asked about the guiding principles of their “faith,” one Jewish participant questioned what was meant by the use of the word “faith” instead of the word “religion.” This participant, Participant 3, then explained that the word “faith” carried a different meaning than “religion” to them:

I don't want to say faith, because I don't believe in God, but my religion is about keeping traditions alive. I don't believe in God because I don't want to. I think it would make me sad if God existed, because there is so much bad stuff in the world.

This conceptualization of “faith” versus “religion” was a unique concept in this interview pool, yet it is not a unique concept within the broader Jewish community. Abby Seitz, a freelance journalist from Jerusalem, shared a similar experience. To Seitz, the value of the ritual is in the connection to tradition. Seitz, in an article on the website HeyAlma, explains that keeping Shabbat and praying are both “concept[s] that [have] been a critical part of uniting the Jewish people through liturgy and thought for thousands of years, rather than a [connection to a] supreme being,” (2019). The modern conflation of faith/belief and religion within American society is, in large part, due to the fact that Protestant Christianity has been infused into the laws and power structures within the United States. In the book *Religion, Law, USA* compiled by Joshua Dubler and Isaac Weiner, an essay by Sarah Imhoff describes this as “indebtedness” (New York University Press 2020); in this line of logic, the United States owes many of its modern ideas about religion, including the “idea that belief is—or at least should be—central to religion,” (New York University Press 2020). Other religious traditions and national cultures have come to understand religion without “faith” as the central component, so it is not entirely unheard of for tradition or another aspect of religion to play a central role in the religious experiences of an individual or group.

This sentiment of tradition as central to Jewish culture was reflected in other interviews, but none of the other participants mentioned this distinction between religion and faith, nor did they indicate not believing in God. In fact, another Jewish participant, Participant 4, indicated that instead of sadness as a reaction to the concept of God, they found great comfort in the idea. “I think that the idea that like there is like a being who's looking out for me was very crucial to me

as someone who faced harassment or whatnot for being queer,” Participant 4 said. Rather than feeling upset at the idea of God in a world with so much “bad stuff”, Participant 4 felt that the only reason they were able to persevere through the more challenging parts of their existence as a queer person was their faith in God. This sentiment of finding comfort in someone “looking out for me” was far more common in the interviews of other participants, yet this debate on how God can exist if evil is allowed to occur is a very old philosophical issue that came to the forefront of Jewish discourse after the Holocaust (Finding Meaning, n.d.). This question of wrestling with the idea of an omnipotent God who allows terrible things to occur is at the heart of much of post-Holocaust Jewish theology, spurring many modern debates about the nature of sin, punishment, and belief in God in the wake of horrible atrocities. It is a debate that is likely to be reflected if this interview format is expanded upon in the future, yet it was not a central focus of this study.

5.4 Finding Faith Through Their Queer Identity

During the course of the interviews with people who identified as both LGBTQ+ and religious, the idea of queering the religious emerged from the testimonies of several participants. This idea of bringing queer lenses to religious ideologies is far from new, with theorists like Claudine Schippert advancing a field that aims to “queer religion, to demonstrate the queerness of religion (its counter-normative and subversive potential [...], the opportunities [religion] provide[s] for non-normative practices [...]etc.), and to examine [...] further the queering of religion scholarship in academic contexts,” (2005), or authors like Ann Pellegrini, Daniel Boyarin, and Daniel Itzkovitz who advance an interest in “exploring the complex of social arrangements

and processes through which modern Jewish and homosexual identities emerged as traces of each other,” (2005). While many of the participants may not have been through the finer details of theoretical arguments from scholars like Schippert, they still brought the queer into the religious via subversive text readings, metaphors, and personal testimony.

Many participants, both Jewish and Christian, mentioned stories they remembered reading as part of their experience in religion. One of the participants, when explaining aspects of their religion that they felt were central to their religious experience, mentioned stories from the Torah that are also found in the Bible:

I like Ruth and Naomi, which is very lesbian of me. They don't have a sexual relationship, but they are so devoted to each other. Ruth's speech where she talks about "Your people are my people, and your God is my God" scratches a very specific need for me. And my friend, who is a gay man, loves the story of Jonathan and David, which makes sense. You read it and you're like "Jonathan loves David. David loves God, and singing."

This participant's reading of the story of Ruth and Naomi is far from uncommon. Several articles, blog posts, and books have been written about queer interpretations of the Book of Ruth, including Ruth Preser's 2017 essay, "Things I Learned from the Book of Ruth", and a post for the website of the Jewish Women's Archive in 2020 (Spivack). This story was also the motto for the Third Lesbian Conference held in Natanya, Israel in 2004 and the line "Wherever you go, I go," from the speech from Ruth to Naomi referenced by this participant, was printed onto T-shirts for the conference (Spivack 2020). Ruth and Naomi, though never expressly indicated as queer, have long since been a symbol within queer religious communities of queer devotion and love despite hardship.

This connection between religious text and queerness was echoed in another interview. This participant, who was also Jewish, was asked whether the religion had different opinions on trans people versus people in same-sex relationships, and she said:

I saw this interesting Tiktok on how being trans is actually very similar to converting to Judaism, because in Judaism, it is seen that you are born with a Jewish soul but you just hadn't found that connection yet. Same thing with trans people. They were just born in the wrong body.

While the Tiktok video this participant referenced is no longer available, there are several online articles and testimonies of the parallels between religious conversion and gender conversion. Sources like the Jewish Journal and HeyAlma have both shared articles on the connections between converting to Judaism and being trans, with several Reddit pages sharing similar ideas surrounding the parallels of Jewish-conversion and trans identity. This second instance of queering the religious is less focused on a specific text and more on the general idea that change, whether between religions or genders, is a natural and welcome part of the religious discourse of Judaism.

While Christian participants did not explicitly call attention to any stories or concepts, many (both queer and non-LGBTQ) mentioned that they had been exposed to interpretations of seemingly-homophobic passages of the Bible that affirmed LGBTQ+ identity. One such interpretation comes from Leviticus 18:22, which is often thought traditionally to have condemned same-sex relations. However, as author Jan Joosten articulates in an article for *The Journal of Theological Studies*, several other interpretations of this line in the Bible have been offered in recent years, articulating a condemnation of pedophilia, adultery, or incest rather than a condemnation of all sexual activity between members of the same sex (Joosten 2020).

One concept proved particularly important in the religious and queer identity of one participant, and that was the concept of unconditional love. For Participant 5, a nondenominational Christian who was raised Catholic, stated that while they often face homophobia within religious spaces, they believe that their religion “calls me to love and be the truest version of myself as I was made, which is LGBT.” This self-love did not come quickly, this participant said, as many years of internalized and externalized homophobia conditioned them to try and ignore their queer identity in hopes of one day finding a heterosexual relationship or joining the priesthood. Yet they believed that as they began to accept their queer identity, they actually grew closer to God. They said:

I have found, as someone who is out and has been out for a long time and who is now in an outwardly queer relationship, that being my authentic self and loving myself is a religious act of being exactly who I am as I was made. As I have grown more accepting of myself, I have grown to see myself as more religious.

The participant then paused for a moment and asked if they could say something potentially “rude” for an academic audience. I then asked them to elaborate on what that meant, to which the participant initially responded with “Sorry if this is inappropriate, but having gay sex has made me love God more. It was the final barrier to fully seeing and accepting myself.” The participant explained that their self-acceptance had come in waves; coming out, dating, and flirting had all come with moral struggles of their own, but the final obstacle to self-acceptance was the actual act of queer sexuality. And while the specifics of this participant’s story may have been unique in this interview set, the concept of accepting queer identity to further religious belief is not. The participant mentioned in section 5.2.2 expressed a similar sense of religious and gender euphoria when they first publicly wore a kippah. These acts of queer identity, whether seemingly small or

monumental, all served as moments of connection not only to their queer identity but to a higher power of abounding love.

6.0 The Possibility of Change

Nearing the end of each interview, I asked participants whether they saw a change occurring or a potential change possible in terms of acceptance for LGBTQ+ people, whether that be a shift towards more inclusion or less inclusion. The answer varied widely amongst participants, but a few common themes emerged from this question that will be discussed in this section.

6.1 Change in the Past as a Guidestone for the Future

The first theme that emerged in response to the question of change in the future was that there has already been major change in the past. Several participants referenced generational divides in understandings of the LGBTQ+ community, whether that be a difference they see in familial life or in their wider religious context. One Jewish participant explained the change they saw that spanned a single generation. They explained that their parent would probably have a different perspective on gender identity versus same-sex relationships, saying:

I think my dad would say that there's a difference in how trans people are viewed versus gay people, just because he grew up in a time where trans identity was less accepted. I think it's more accepting now than it was then, and I think that now the sects aren't as separated as it was in the past, so I don't see why it can't become more progressive.

This massive shift in opinion occurred within this participant's sect of Judaism, but this sentiment of radical shift in the past 60 years was echoed across religions and political ideology. However,

while this participant highlighted a shift in perspective that happened within one generation, other participants felt that this kind of shift in acceptance took longer than one or two generations. One participant, a Muslim student who was raised with religious family members, recalls a more gradual shift in tolerance of LGBTQ+ identity:

I think [change in acceptance] is possible, especially if you look at the difference between my generation and my grandmother's generation. That is such a huge shift. I definitely see homophobia and transphobia two, three generations above me and it's almost inescapable or expected for them. But if I think about my generation... I mean, everyone's got a gay cousin.

This idea of larger generational divides arose in several interviews, especially from participants who practice more strict forms of religion, such as consistent prayer, fasting, and other rituals that rely on tradition to carry significance. It was far from excluded to just devout religious students, however. Participants expressed noticing a wide variety of acceptance levels, even in religions that they did not necessarily practice. Many participants referenced the ubiquity of Christianity in American culture and pointed to the legalization of gay marriage in 2015 as an example of the, in one Jewish participant's words, "pervasiveness of homophobia in the subconscious of the Christian American public." Another participant who identified as Muslim joked that 2015 felt like "an embarrassingly short time ago" for same-sex marriage to be legalized in the United States. Many participants contextualized their belief in change within their position as citizens of the United States. Participant 6 was initially hesitant to say whether they believed a significant shift in acceptance of LGBTQ+ people was possible, stating:

I think it's very community dependent. I think if you ask me if it's a shift I see on campus, then maybe. If you ask me if it's a shift I see possible in India, then I'd say no. It's less

likely for that to be happening, and again that goes back to the fact that that's more culture-oriented. I don't see this [change in acceptance] happening in countries that are more conservative-minded. But in the United States, yeah I think it could happen in New Jersey. South Carolina maybe less so. Florida even less so."

For many students such as Participant 6, context mattered a great deal when talking about change. Some believed that change was only possible for change to occur in certain countries or cultures, arguing that many cultures do not talk about this issue enough for change to occur within the foreseeable future. Other participants argued that there was a noticeable shift in the amount that people were talking about LGBTQ+ issues, in part due to globalizing forces driving change across the world. One participant, who tried to watch a video lecture on the topic of religion and LGBTQ+ issues right before their interview, shared how there was an increasing shift in Islamic law and Muslim culture due to exposure to other ideas from varying cultures:

The scholar talks about how living in a Western world exposes us to new discussions, and I agree. Laws have changed. In Saudi Arabia, now you can buy alcohol. Alcohol is strictly prohibited in Islam, which for a country to follow Sharia law and to sell alcohol is insane. It was something that people were like "oh this will never happen" and it did.

In a world of increasingly global trade, tourism, and intellectual exchange, new ideas enter the worlds of religion and culture, allowing new understandings and perspectives to grow. However, as many participants pointed out in their interviews, this changing of laws due to exposure to new ideas is not a new concept. A Jewish participant pointed to passages of the Torah that explained old customs and laws that no longer apply. "Like a lot of them are based on temple sacrifice, and we don't do that anymore," they explained. Old customs and laws began to change or disappear as new perspectives joined those religions and cultures. This ebb and flow of customs was in place

long before the modern era, but with the advent of the internet, the rapid cycle of information allows for change to happen more rapidly, or it at least affords the potential for rapid change in cultures worldwide.

6.2 It Takes Time: Patience as a Virtue in the Wait for Change

With this rapid media culture of change and development, patience can often be left at the wayside as preference is given to quick, immediate fixes and ideas. Many participants, however, expressed a belief that true change, lasting change, is not going to be found quickly. One participant, when addressing the varying sects of Judaism, expressed their understanding that Orthodox Judaism believed that “you can’t take a law back.” This participant went on to say that from what they had experienced, this belief that laws could not be overturned created a barrier for change in the more traditional sects of Judaism such as orthodoxy, despite groups like Eshel offering support for LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews. While this perspective focused mainly on the participant’s ideas of Judaism, many other participants expressed similar concerns around the immutability of certain laws and texts for their religion. “I don’t see a large shift possible,” Participant 11 explained, “largely because in my religion, the word of God isn’t questioned. To change the ideas around LGBTQ+ people, it would involve questioning the word of God and I don’t see that happening.” The word of God, in this case the Quran, is an unwavering text that, unlike the Bible, does not offer a large room for conflicting translations from this participant’s perspective. Thus, despite a number of translation issues within Quran transcriptions, this participant’s perception was that there is not a lot of room for change in how to understand the

text; there is little mutability, according to Participant 11, in how the original non-translated text can be understood, and thus changes in Islam regarding the LGBTQ+ community will be difficult if not impossible. Another Muslim student, Participant 2, highlighted a similar idea:

When the religion was first established, it wasn't made for just those people at that time. In my experience, [Muslims] interpret the religions that came before us like Judaism as the word of God delivered by Moses for those people at that time. Same thing with Christianity. But when it came to Muhammad, he brought the word down for people for all time. So I don't think Islam will ever change. The text has remained exactly the same. Scholars have been giving out different rulings about things that didn't exist back then, like praying on planes since planes didn't exist back then. So I think that Islam itself will never change, but people should be kinder to those struggling with being queer and Muslim.

Participant 2 then went on to explain that the immutability of the text was indeed part of its comfort; unwavering rules allowed for there to be a core essence to Islam, a cornerstone for life that did not change nor falter. Yet the end of this quote suggests a different kind of change; Islam may never, in the eyes of these participants, change its belief on the sin of homosexuality, but the culture of the religious community could and, as Participant 2 argues, should change to be kinder to those who find themselves grappling with queer and Muslim identities. While there are many movements to include queer identities in Muslim communities and the religion of Islam itself, with scholars such as Scott Kugle writing entire books on the topic of homosexuality in Islam, many participants focused more in their responses on the possibility for tolerance of LGBTQ+ identity rather than the idea of full acceptance. This lack of belief in acceptance may stem from the issue discussed in section 3.1.1.; participants may have been unaware of this scholarship on homosexuality in Islam due to an avoidance of discussing these topics of LGBTQ+ identity in

religious spaces. Whatever the cause may be, many interviewees chose to focus instead on the future of tolerance and lessened stigma for LGBTQ+ people.

Whether the participants thought change in acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities was possible, most agreed that any change in ideology was going to require patience. As one participant explained, “it’s not like [there]’s nobody [working for change]; there are Orthodox Jews who are accepting. I think it’s just going to take time.” Time here did not carry a specific timeline for this participant, and the time change would take seemed to vary between participants, yet one participant highlighted the work that could be done in the meantime to advance acceptance of LGBTQ+ identity: education. When their friend came out to their congregation as nonbinary, Participant 12 explained that there was a learning curve in terms of acceptance. “With generational divides,” Participant 12 said, “some people just didn’t get [gender nonconformity]. It took a little explaining, but it was a new concept to them. Just like if someone were to try to talk to me about physics. I don’t know physics, so this is a new concept and I don’t know what it is.” LGBTQ+ acceptance, just like any other topic, can be taught to those who are willing to learn. While not every religion offers full acceptance of same-sex marriage or trans identity, members of various religions can work towards a future in which people are not afraid of being open with who they are and towards a religious community that fosters faith without judgment.

7.0 Conclusion

Religion, gender, and sexuality are all major factors within modern political, cultural, and social discourse. This research becomes dire when looking at the latest generation of voters and members of the public discourse. In the advent of a new age, research must continue to study the opinions, thoughts, and beliefs of the youngest members of society in hopes of creating a tomorrow built on equity.

I adopted a focused yet flexible interview approach to understanding the political and ideological ideas of college students at the University of Pittsburgh. While these interviews provide a compelling example of the opinions of young adults on issues of religion and LGBTQ+ issues, these results do not speak for the entirety of young religious adults. These candidates were a small selection of religious-identifying college students from a city environment, thus these results cannot begin to encapsulate the political or ideological beliefs of students across the United States. This method could be applied to college campuses nationwide, interviewing students from rural campuses, different geographic regions, and other countries as well for a wider look at the minds of young religious people. This method could also be applied to specifically students who identify as both LGBTQ+ and religious to understand their political positionality in depth, but this would likely require a sample pool of multiple college campuses. None of the LGBTQ+ people interviewed for this study were Muslim, and this is a gap in the data that should be further examined by research studies in the future.

There was also a significant gap in how many people identified as liberal (12 participants) versus those who identified as right-leaning (2). Since this study openly marketed itself as an

interview about LGBTQ+ issues and religion, there is a high likelihood that potential participants self-selected out of participation for fear of retribution, judgment, or debate contrary to their beliefs. This is especially likely for potential participants on the conservative end, who, as mentioned in section 4.0, often feel a pressure of censorship on majority-Democratic campuses, whether or not the campus is trying to limit their expression of political ideology. Thus, it is highly likely that a study like this one could employ a different marketing strategy and gain more engagement from self-identified conservatives.

While these interviews do not represent the entirety of this generation's religious and political beliefs, there were many compelling themes that emerged: non-judgment, a feeling of lacking authority to talk about religion, the value of community, and the difficulty of faith-based conversations about LGBTQ+ issues. There were also sections studying groups that were underrepresented in the study population: conservative-leaning students and LGBTQ+ students. Both groups could provide an interesting area for future research, yet these sections also emerged with their own themes, including the reconstruction of homophobia through a conservative lens and the reclamation of religion by some LGBTQ+ people. Finally, this thesis focused on participants' beliefs on the possibility of change in the future. Most participants argued that change towards more acceptance was possible if not already in progress, yet it could be a potential research avenue to see if these opinions of hope for more acceptance are similar to this generation's opinions 5-10 years into the future. Areas of this field of queer religious theory that were not examined in this paper, such as the dynamics of race in understanding LGBTQ+ identity and religion, provide compelling areas for future research. While religion and LGBTQ+ identity can often prove to be a difficult conversation to have, it is vital to begin this research and continue to inquire how these

conversations on religion and queerness occur, develop, and continue to shape our political landscape as the world approaches the rest of the 21st century.

Appendix

The text below outlines the script utilized for the interviews of religious college students. I have included the beginning disclosures in an effort at full transparency as to the entire interaction between researcher and research participant.

There were three questions that were added to the script after the interviews had begun. These questions are marked with an asterisk (*) at the end of the question. These three questions were added because they had begun to naturally come up in all earlier interviews, and I wanted to make sure I addressed these areas with all participants if they did not come up naturally in the course of later interviews.

Before we begin this interview, I want to inform you that I will be using audio recording to maintain records of our interview and for future analysis of your responses. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [**Participant answers yes or no**].

The purpose of this research study is to understand the political and ideological ideals of religious-identifying students, with specific attention paid to ideologies surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. We will be asking approximately 20 religious-identifying college students to talk about their beliefs on religion and political identity, specifically focusing on LGBTQ+ issues in an interview format for about 30 minutes, with longer time allotted if needed/requested by the participant. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you. There are also no incentives for participation in this study, other than if you are affiliated with a club that offers attendance credit for participation. Your participation in this study

is voluntary. You can withdraw from this study at any time. To do so, email the PI at ksr46@pitt.edu stating that you wish to withdraw yourself from the study. If you choose not to participate, or if you do not complete the study, this will not affect your relationship with the University of Pittsburgh, the Gender Sexuality and Women's Studies department, Dr. Rachel Kranson, or the student organizations you are affiliated with. This study is being conducted by Tri Raynes, who can be reached at ksr46@pitt.edu if you have any questions. Would you still like to participate? **[Participant answers yes or no].**

This is interview [insert interview #]. You will only be identifiable by that number in the finding/discussion for the dissertation at the end.

We're going to start with some background information. You are a student at the University of Pittsburgh, correct?

Do you or people you associate with openly identify as LGBTQ+?

Do you identify with a political party/affiliation/ideology? If so, which one?

Do you identify as religious?

What religion?

What sect/denomination of that religion [if applicable]?

What do you think are the key practices/rituals in your religious/spiritual life? Are there holidays, prayers, or other practices in your faith that you find important or central to your experience?

Are there particular stories or sections of religious texts that are central to your faith or that you particularly enjoy?*

What do you feel are the guiding principles/basic elements of your faith?

Do you feel you connect with these principles? Are there certain tenets of your faith that you feel strongly connected with or tied to?

Does your faith/religion encourage a certain view on homosexuality/trans people/LGBTQ+ issues as a whole? If so, what? (encourage them to expand upon that.)

Is there a religious text that seems to encourage this?

Is this view more of a cultural/social phenomenon within congregations?

Is there a difference between how members of your religion view various parts of the LGBTQ+ community? For example, is there a difference between how trans people and people in same-sex relationships are viewed?*

Do you feel that your religion's teachings and beliefs on homosexuality/LGBTQ+ issues/communities differ from your own? Why or why not?

If so, do you think there are like-minded people within your faith tradition? Do you see a possibility for a shift in understanding?

In either case, and if they have not explained this already, ask them to articulate their position on LGBTQ+ people.

Have you had any experiences in which you had to rationalize your position on LGBTQ+ people to members of your religion? If so, describe.

Have you had any experiences in which you had to rationalize your position on LGBTQ+ people to people outside of your religion? If so, describe.

If the participant identifies as LGBTQ+ or is friends/affiliated with people who are LGBTQ+, ask them about hostility from LGBTQ+ people regarding religious identity. Have you had experiences where LGBTQ+ people come with assumptions about religious identities?*

Is there anything else on this topic that you can think of that I didn't cover in these questions or that we didn't talk about yet that you wanted to share?

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