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**“Stepsons and Stepdaughters”:
Chosen Communities, Religion, Faith, and LGBT Liberation**

**By
John M. Erickson**

**Claremont Graduate University
2019**

Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of John M. Erickson as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion.

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Abstract

“Stepsons and Stepdaughters”:
Chosen Communities, Religion, Faith, and LGBT Liberation

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John M. Erickson

Claremont Graduate University: 2019

This dissertation explores the new roles the LGBT movement took on in place of religious and faith-based communities. The new discourse behind the LGBT rights movement’s recent popularity and credibility in popular culture in the U.S. created a generation of activists who grew up both within and outside of religious communities that affirmed an individual’s sexuality as an important part of their identity rather than a sinful one. While newer generations of both closeted and open LGBT individuals and religiously affiliated men and women grew up knowing about the fight for and against gay marriage, equal rights, and fair and non-discriminatory treatment, the battle for LGBT rights was reduced, through various mediums like the media, the internet, and popular culture, as a battle between religion and the LGBT movement. This dissertation seeks to unravel the stories behind the various struggles each community, both religious and LGBT affiliated, has and is currently undergoing around the issues of equality and the inclusion of LGBT individuals in religious communities and traditions. It does this against the backdrop of the religious and faith-based communities that have traditionally excluded LGBT individuals.

Through this process of including individuals and communities on both sides of the LGBT issue, new constructive and effective discourses developed to further bridge the divide between religion and sexuality rather than creating a wider gap. As a result,

both young and old individuals were forced to deal with the matter both publicly and privately.

This exploration is grounded in the analysis of two years of ethnographic study with widely regarded experts and activists in the field LGBT equality, both within and outside of religious and faith-based communities. While the church and the LGBT community played a key role in creating the various narratives that put them at odds with each other, I focus on the experience of interviewees from within three time periods: post-Stonewall Inn Riots of 1969; the rise of the HIV/AIDS crisis at the height of the Religious Right and Moral Majority popularity in the late 1970s through the 1980s; and, lastly, the fight for marriage equality with the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996 to the United States Supreme Court Decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* which made same sex marriage legal nationwide. Beginning in the 1960s, gays and lesbians who left the churches of their youth created intentional communities of care that fulfilled many of the same human needs that their religious communities had while separating themselves from the negative stigmas attached to their sexuality in most traditionalist Christian congregations. Ironically, then, conservative Christian churches thus helped create the modern LGBT movement in America, imbuing it with a sense of not only political but also spiritual purpose.

For Gladys

Acknowledgements

The work of acknowledging all of those who have inspired, helped, and empowered me is a daunting task. I do not believe I will ever fully comprehend the assistance everyone has provided me throughout this long, and sometimes scary, academic inquiry into a subject I both ran away from – as a young, queer kid in Ripon, WI – and ran into upon my acceptance into a graduate program in religion. Although I would like to thank everyone that I ever met, the scholar in me knows, much like the subject of this dissertation, that I have to see: “the forest for the trees and not the trees for the forest” as my dissertation chair once told me when I considered giving up. Therefore, I will do my best to thank each and every person, within reason, who has helped me along this journey of daring to be adequate.

First and foremost, I am deeply thankful to all of my interview subjects. Although some of their names have been changed in the dissertation to protect their anonymity, I am deeply grateful they took a chance on this project and me, and its findings wouldn't have been possible without their input. Specifically, I am grateful to Rev. Troy Perry for reasons that only he will know; I challenge anyone to find a truer servant of God than Rev. Perry. Although all my interviews were special in their own right, during his, I truly believe I felt the Divine. Thanks to the people who completed my online survey and gave me more data than a scholar could have ever hoped for. I hope my work supports the vision for religious and faith-based communities that are more welcoming to those who are different as well as vice versa, with LGBT communities allowing and welcoming members from religious communities more frequently into the discussion around LGBT equality.

Dr. Patrick Mason plucked me out of the Women's Studies in Religion program when he first arrived at Claremont Graduate University. His actions empowered this queer, radical feminist activist to explore beliefs and ideas I had never known. He empowered me to not only *be* better but also to always *do* right by the communities and voices I am responsible for throughout this project. I hope he finds this project as enlightening as I have hearing his critical feedback and rigorous debate as I continued towards the finish line, sometimes more slowly than he would have preferred. Patrick was the tough adviser and dissertation chair I needed to complete this project in the manner that I needed to; his edits would strike the fear of God in me and I would oftentimes feel like I could never adequately address his criticisms in a way that would only cause for more. His rigorous argumentation is present on every page of my dissertation because he strengthened my work through every edit. Through this rigorous oversight I became a better scholar, and ultimately, person.

Dr. Erika Dyson and I met at a Women's Studies in Religion salon held by Dr. Karen Torjesen when I was a young graduate student. From that moment on, I discovered not only a friend but also a mentor and guide who gave me my first opportunity to teach and shape the minds of young adults at Harvey Mudd College. Although a lot has happened in both of our lives since meeting, having her as a mentor and friend made me realize that everything, no matter how long it took, would be all right. Erika taught me how I could write myself into the story I was telling in my dissertation and to celebrate my troubled past with religion rather than run away from it. Through her incredibly helpful suggestions, brilliant edits, and elegant prose, this dissertation far exceeded the goals I originally set out for it when I started.

Dr. Helene Slessarev-Jamir is a brilliant scholar who, even within her criticism, always inspired and pushed me to think outside the box. Though I was never able to take a class with her while I was in coursework, we bonded and became friends over our passion of exploring the struggle religious individuals faced during the legal debate around Proposition 8 in California and how we could heal the deep wounds inflicted upon LGBT people by religious and faith-based communities. This project is an accumulation of the work we shared with each other as well as the work we still need to do in order to get to a place of love and acceptance for all.

The Women's Studies in Religion and the Applied Women's Studies programs at Claremont Graduate University were integral into my development as a scholar. Claremont Graduate University provided me with the perfect intellectual milieu to meet other scholars and activists from all walks of life. Thank you to Lisa Maldonado, for always believing in me; Amanda and Nick Pumphrey for being there when I needed them the most and for always making me laugh, no matter what the circumstance; Marci Ovadia, for being my ride or die sister; Kirsten Gerdes and Tracy Hawkins for spending countless hours with me at conferences around the globe; Anjeanette LeBoeuf, for always showing me the right path to take, even when I didn't want to; Dr. Marie Cartier, for being my saving grace and fairy godmother and daring me to be adequate even as deadlines loom; Dr. Linda Perkins, for taking a chance on a young women's studies student from Oshkosh, WI and accepting me as the first man into the Applied Women's Studies Program at Claremont Graduate University, a decision I do not take lightly as well as one that I will cherish for the rest of my life; and to all of the other people I met while at Claremont Graduate University, thank you for letting me be part of your story.

I wouldn't be the person I am today without the formative years I spent at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. Dr. Liz Cannon was my first women's studies professor and the person who used more red pens on the first paper I submitted to her than probably any other student she had ever had. However, within those red markups, she saw someone who she wanted to invest in and push to become a scholar of women and gender studies. Her powerful queer activism led me to discover the beauty of concepts and scholars I would have never been exposed to if I hadn't had meet her. Furthermore, Dr. Kathleen Corley was the first person to tell me about Claremont Graduate University. Through her classes, I rediscovered religion and redefined it not as a tool of subjugation but also of liberation. She is a brilliant and eloquent friend who only continues to inspire other students, much like myself, to dream of sunny California and a place called Claremont. Thank you to Dr. Christine Roth for asking me multiple times if I was sure I wanted to attend graduate school. I'm happy with my choice and I thank you for making sure I knew far ahead of what I was getting myself in to. Furthermore, I need to thank the Women's Center at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. Having a key to the building, I oftentimes snuck in afterhours to write my honors thesis. It was the home I always wanted but never knew I needed. Outside of academia, my life as a volleyball player was integral to my development as a scholar. Looking back on my life thus far, I realize I was asking questions about sexuality, religion, and identity long before I was accepted into graduate school. Thank you, Brian Schaefer for asking me to attend the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh; it was a decision that changed my life and I am forever grateful to you. Your support has been a lifeline for me.

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have ever experienced. Thank you for asking to make me dinner long ago at a club in West Hollywood; I'm so thankful I said yes.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to Gladys Hristko. My maternal grandmother, she was and will always be the person who, no matter the circumstance, believed that I could be whatever I wanted to be. Every day she told me: "You can do it." Although she was alive when I left for graduate school, her death a few years later left me questioning my faith. It was only through writing this dissertation that I was able to slowly crawl my way back to becoming the person she always knew and achieving my dreams, no matter how big or daunting they may have seemed. It is through her love, and her ability to show it every day, that I am who I am today; and if that isn't some form of the Divine, then I do not know what is. Thank you, Gladys, for showing me the joy that comes with faith.

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INTRODUCTION

A dramatic change occurred in U.S. socioreligious and political movements in the lead up to the presidential election of 1980. The rising influence of the Christian Right following Ronald Reagan's election added to growing tensions within the gay rights community, many of whom were impacted either directly or indirectly by the HIV/AIDS crisis.¹ The Christian Right increased both their negative attacks and the amount of time spent discussing progressive social movements, such as gay rights, on the national stage. As a result, more members of the LGBT community began viewing the Christian Right and religious groups, generally, as a conjoined force working against gay rights. Closeted and open LGBT individuals in religious communities saw their former places of worship transformed into political battlefields of cultural rhetoric that demonized not only their struggle but also their very survival.² While activists and scholars like to promulgate the idea that secular gay culture and hierarchal religious structure are at odds with one another, evidence suggest that they have been intimately involved with shaping and influencing each other, in both positive and negative ways.³ While Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson appropriated social and cultural rhetoric that utilized fear tactics to ostracize members of the LGBT community afflicted with HIV/AIDS, they were also busy influencing major political figures, such as President Reagan and other leaders within the Republican Party.

¹ The Christian right is an informal coalition formed around a core of white, evangelical Protestants who

² Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 151.

³ This does not mean to imply that there are not continual points of contention, as well as ongoing battles and difficult dialogues, occurring about sexuality and religion within religious institutions and organizations to this day.

Following the mass movement of LGBT individuals into urban spaces following WWII, communities focused on gay rights allowed individuals to form communities of their choosing, rather than relying on those of their birth. LGBT immigration represented a new American migration to urban spaces, paralleling other major urbanizing population shifts, such as African Americans in the early twentieth century and “plain folk” whites from the upper South to southern and central California in the mid-twentieth century. LGBT individuals were now occupying spaces of their own choosing and, as a result, they didn’t have to remain in non-accepting environments where they were often ostracized due to their sexuality.

Although some LGBT individuals went back to the religious institutions they were raised within in an effort to fight for change from the inside, others existed outside of these traditions, either working to squash these movements from the outside or creating new traditions that affirmed their struggles. Vocal movements began to take shape alongside the “New Christian Right” that preserved the struggle of LGBT individuals. These organizations included Harry Hay’s founding of the Mattachine Society on November 11, 1950 and the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian rights organization in the United States, in 1955.⁴ These organizations and the publicity and power they began to establish shed new light on the lives of not only LGBT individuals and the struggles they had to face in society, but also the religious traditions and communities they left or were forced to leave as a result of their sexual orientation. American LGBT communities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s faced uphill battles against various homophobic movements that remained rooted in normative medical, societal, and

⁴ The Daughters of Bilitis provided a social alternative to lesbian bars. Specifically, as the group grew in members it focused on providing more support to women who were afraid to come out.

religious values. The fear of disclosing ones' sexuality publicly led LGBT individuals further away from social and religious communities and traditions in favor of spaces created specifically for or by them.

The 1970s saw the beginning/continuation of LGBT groups that openly discussed religion and spirituality. In these spaces, utilizing sexuality improperly was not categorized as sinful. Hay's Mattachine Society and the Radical Faerie movement collaborated to form spaces where LGBT individuals could openly discuss and exist in religious and spiritual spaces of their own design while working to create communities that didn't classify them or their sexual activities as sinful.⁵ The Radical Faerie movement worked with LGBT individuals interested in reclaiming their spirituality and sexuality as one empowering identity. The core mission of the Radical Faeries is to reject hetero-imitation and redefine gender and sexual identity through spirituality.⁶ Started as both a counter-cultural movement during the sexual revolution of the 1970s as well as an alternative to the increasingly homophobic culture of the United States in the 1950s through the 1980s, the Radical Faerie subculture sought to challenge mainline Christianity's hold over the strict reading of sexuality in modern society and to provide a safe and empowering space for gay men to express their sexuality and spirituality freely and openly. Radical Faeries challenge our modern-day assumptions about LGBT identity within mainstream, commercialized, and patriarchal cultures. They propelled LGBT individuals to form centralized communities and organizations fighting for equality and rights, all while both utilizing and rejecting religious discourse.

⁵ Heather R. White, "Proclaiming Liberation: The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946-1976," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11.4 (2008): 102-19.

⁶ Hetero-imitation is also now defined as homonormativity; wherein LGBT individuals, mainly gay men, imitate and perform roles traditionally associated with heterosexual men to pass in a growingly homophobic world.

Engaging New Age and Neopagan spirituality, the Radical Faerie movement evolved from a small gathering of men at the 1979 Spiritual Conference for Radical Fairies in Arizona, who explored the ways gay men could merge spirituality and gay liberation, into a full-scale, international spiritual and social organization that expresses a wide range of genders, sexual orientations, and identities.⁷

The Missing Piece: Religion

In discussing the historic Stonewall Inn Riots of 1969, which took place 19 years after the founding of the Mattachine Society, Harry Hay stated: “The importance of Stonewall is that it changed the pronoun from “I” to “We”.⁸ The shift from “I” to “We” became an integral part of the growing homophile community that was taking shape as part of the movements for social and sexual freedom in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ The homophile community served as a powerful symbol to LGBT individuals, living both inside and outside of urban and metropolitan areas, that other LGBT people existed and that they were not alone in the various struggles they were facing. Academic works explored the general relationship between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and various religious communities. However, comparatively little work examined the lived experiences of LGBT individuals within specific religious organizations and faith-based communities.¹⁰ This is largely due to the fact that a

⁷ White, “Proclaiming Liberation.”

⁸ *The Advocate* Editorial Staff, “Harry Hay Dies at 90,” *The Advocate*, October 25, 2002.

⁹ The word homophile is used here in this context because it was how the LGBT community was described prior to the emergence of the gay liberation movement of the 1960s.

¹⁰ This dissertation will deal with different time periods in the LGBT movement. Throughout history the LGBT movement has evolved in not only individuals who identify with the struggle for gay and lesbian rights, but also how they identify with the movement. In some cases, homosexual men and women in the 1950s and 1960s identified not in the LGBT spectrum that we have today, but simply under the umbrella term “gay”. The creation of subsequent lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual

significant amount of research is based upon case studies related to LGBT individuals, their religious or spiritual identities, and whether or not they consider themselves to be religious or faithful.¹¹

A 2013 Pew Research Center study noted, “LGBT adults are less religious than the general public.”¹² Unpacking the social, cultural, religious, and sexual norms that are seen as conflicting with each other allows for a better understanding of the void that exists between religious and LGBT communities.¹³ While roughly half of all the individuals in the Pew survey state that they have no religious affiliation, compared with 20% of the heterosexuals surveyed, a growing number of religiously unaffiliated millennials claim their non-affiliation is a result of how religious institutions treat and perceive gay and lesbian people.¹⁴

A recent study released by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), a non-profit, non-partisan think tank, explores the changing landscape of gay rights in America. Statistical data from the study regarding the progression of attitudes around gay rights suggests that regular churchgoers (those who attend at least once or twice a month and, particularly, individuals who belong to religious groups that support same-

identifying categories came later historically as the struggle for equality moved beyond general social and cultural acceptance and into categories such as politics, religion, and medical spheres. Currently, the acronym LGBT is one of many accepted categorical identifiers that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual men and women use. Some others that exist are GLBT and LGBTQ. Additionally, this dissertation is inclusive of all aspects that the LGBT community intends to represent; the acronym continues to grow and develop, signifying that the community itself does not represent a static community such as the most recent incarnation: LBTTQI2A. Specifically, in regards to whatever time period is under discussion, the use of the term LGBT may be replaced with: homosexual rights or gay and lesbian rights.

¹¹ As opposed to a general survey of LGBT individuals from different generations and during various time frames ranging from when the gay rights movement was a fledging organization to its current status as a major social, political, and cultural influence.

¹² “A Study of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times,” last modified June 13, 2013 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Emily Fetsch, “Are Millennials Leaving Religion Over LGBT Issues?,” Public Religion Research Institute, March 13, 2014.

sex marriage) over-estimate opposition for same-sex marriage in their religious communities by 20% or more.¹⁵ While religious groups, as a whole, have often been identified as proponents of homophobic legislation, this is often at odds with how their fellow congregants feel about same-sex marriage. For example, Catholicism has been traditionally cast as an adversary to the gay-rights movement and 73% of Catholics believe that most of their fellow congregants are opposed to same-sex marriage. However, Catholics who regularly attend church are in fact divided on the issue with the majority favoring (50%) and a slightly smaller number (45%) opposing gay rights, with the other 5% being undecided/neutral.¹⁶ Additionally, in research conducted between 2003-2013, the PRRI found that nearly six out of ten (58%) Americans agree that religious groups are alienating young people by being too judgmental on gay and lesbian issues.¹⁷

As a result of the hostilities and judgment many LGBT individuals faced, they came to identify more with the LGBT community than religious ones. This created a new, more radical class of LGBT activists from the late 1960s to the early 21st century, who no longer saw religious communities or religion in general as a critical marker of their identity.¹⁸ Part of this shift occurred during the emergence and sustained conversations about HIV/AIDS, wherein the media, medical professionals, and major political and social influencers ranging from the President of the United States to Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson, led many Americans to equate HIV/AIDS with gay and sexual

¹⁵ "A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-Sex Marriage and LGBT Issues," last modified February 26, 2014. <http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/02/2014-lgbt-survey/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

liberation. As a result of the this shift in focus, growing support for the rights of the LGBT community across the United States has led to an increase in the number of studies and statistical analyses of the LGBT community. This helps us to both revise and build upon works that have focused solely on LGBT or religious communities prior to said acceptance and popular support, both within and outside of religious and faith-based communities.¹⁹

Chosen Communities and Religion

Some of the grounding questions that shape this dissertation focus on the distinction between communities that people choose to be a part of and those they are born into. Building upon this, can we find an aspect of “lived religion” in what a non-religious individual or community believes and does to improve the welfare of both themselves and their communities?²⁰ If LGBT individuals tend to be less religious than their heterosexual and cisgendered counterparts, is there some way that the gay rights movement fills in for religious community through these positive and reaffirming actions of grace?²¹ Or, conversely, what, if anything, does the gay rights movement owe to religious models of grace in terms of its own governing ideals, organizational strategies, or practices? How might research on the topic contribute to an enhanced scholarly understanding of religion within the gay rights movement while also examining both the positive and negative relationships that have existed between LGBT and religious

¹⁹ Studies include the works of scholars, such as Mark D. Jordan or the PEW and Public Religion Research Institute’s surveys.

²⁰ I utilize David D. Hall’s definition of “lived religion,” as explored in the book *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), and Meredith McGuire, *Live Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²¹ Cisgendered describes individuals whose gender identity (both in perception and experience) correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

communities in general? How have these relationships changed over time, and influenced relationships between multiple generations of LGBT individuals? Throughout these generations, how have LGBT individuals related to organized religions and the narrowing and varying perspectives of each group, which creates new dialogues around the topics of spirituality and sexuality?

This dissertation illustrates how LGBT individuals, in the period ranging from 1960 to 2015, established chosen communities in various urban and city landscapes while combating and navigating homophobic political, social, and religious climates. The scope of this study utilizes interviews with self-identifying members of the LGBT community who were either active or coming of age between 1960 and 2015. This dissertation seeks to expand upon how individuals in the LGBT community dealt with homophobic rhetoric and actions from religious institutions; how that influenced, either positively or negatively, their opinions of religion and spirituality; and, in turn, how this impacted of their identity and community.

This dissertation utilizes studies, such as the 2014 report from the Public Religion Research Institute titled “A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-Sex Marriage and LGBT Issues,” and interviews conducted with diverse LGBT stakeholders. In addressing these questions, and issues, this dissertation brings together interviews, publications, and surveys that provide an in-depth examination of the ways LGBT individuals and the scholars and commentators who have written about them, have approached these questions.

Methodology

One of the biggest dilemmas facing scholars of the LGBT community and their opinions of and interactions with religious traditions and/or religious organizations is the inability to garner access to direct source materials of speeches and other internal church doctrine and policies related to LGBT people. This dissertation explores the experiences of religious and LGBT communities and explores their evolving beliefs, understandings of, and interactions with each other from the early 1960s until *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage across the U.S. in 2015.²² To better understand these experiences, I conducted multiple in-person interviews with a wide-variety of self-identifying lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. The individuals I interviewed varied in age, religious/spiritual background, education, political identification, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, and economic status. All interviewees were asked the same questions, though the order varied in response to the flow of each interview.²³ Additionally, each interview lasted between 1 and 3 hours, was recorded, and transcribed by an external professional transcribing service.

Literature Review

Only a handful of scholars have examined the overarching impact an evolving gay rights movement had on the LGBT community and its perception of religion and of

²² I am using the term “religious communities” in a broad sense. My interviews surveyed people from multiple faith backgrounds.

²³ To further back up the data from the in-person interviews, I distributed an online survey that consisted of identical questions to those used in in-person interviews; the online survey resulted in 161 completed interviews with a wide-variety of respondents. These randomly sampled individuals ranged greatly in religious/spiritual background, educational background, political identification, sexual orientation, class, race, economic status, and a host of other classifications.

religious involvement in the struggle for gay rights throughout the twentieth century.²⁴ These scholars include Mark Jordan, Marcella Althaus-Reid, David Halperin, Heather White, Melissa Wilcox and Molly McGarry, whose work has propelled the exploration of LGBT communities and identities into the realms of religious and theological studies.²⁵ Through their work, each scholar questions discursive spaces where the religious history of the United States impacted, informed, and shaped the lives of LGBT individuals and communities. However, their assertive move focused more on LGBT narratives, stories, and communities within various religious and faith-based communities and traditions rather than on religion as a whole.

Most literature around the LGBT community and religion falls into one of six categories: materials published by (1) religious organizations and or leadership representatives about the LGBT community; (2) journalists; (3) LGBT community or organizational members writing about religious organizations or religion as a general category of examination; (4) LGBT individuals currently in religious or faith-based communities; (5) former members of religious or faith-based communities, some of

²⁴ Most publications on the issue of LGBT identity and religion come from both academic and popular culture sources, such as online blogs, magazines, and social media networks.²⁴ The results have been both an abundance of media that superficially treat topical issues and more sustained scholarly explorations of specific religious traditions and their interactions with the LGBT community. These various sources do not give adequate attention to the bigger problem regarding the histories of struggle and acceptance between LGBT individuals or communities and religious communities. While I am not suggesting that current publications do not add to the overall discussion or have relevant things to say, they fail to analyze the diverse ways religion is both explored and interacted with in the LGBT community and the negative and positive effects it has had on different generations of the gay rights movement. Popular writers such as Dan Savage, Andrew Sullivan, and Michael Warner have written on the topic of LGBT identity and religion for popular media like *Time*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Advocate*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*. However, few have captured the intersectional histories of the LGBT community and religions in the United States ranging from Mormonism, Islam, the Catholic Church, the black church, and Evangelical and Protestant traditions. Many of these authors speak from broad viewpoints or opinions of specific traditions; they, however, fail to focus on the individual importance each religious tradition has on the others.

²⁵ Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); David Halperin, *How to be Gay* (New York: Belknap Press, 2012); and Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

whom also belong to category 3, as well as those who have been excommunicated or banned from their religion of birth; and (6) academic researchers. While most rely on personal experiences and scholarly works as source materials, there are some that incorporate data gathered through in-depth interviews, as well as comprehensive surveys, to better quantify and qualitatively study the impact conservative religious traditions have had on the lives of LGBT individuals and, subsequently, the communities that formed as a result of said impacts.

One of the primary methods for studying LGBT individuals within conservative religious communities is through interviews. In her book, *Pray the Gay Away*, Bernadette Barton interviews gay men and lesbians from the “Bible Belt.” The Bible Belt is an informal term for a region in the southeastern and south-central United States in which socially conservative evangelical Protestantism and other conservative denominations significantly shape the culture. Barton combines experiences with violence, homophobia, and religious conservatism into a larger argument demonstrating how LGBT individuals in conservative religious communities negotiated their identities when they fell into conflict with religious beliefs. Through this process, Barton exemplifies the importance of listening to these individuals in order to understand their relationship to the larger battle for gay rights, which has often been overlooked because of their geographical location.

In her work, Barton draws upon how queer theorist and philosopher Michel Foucault builds upon Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the panopticon. Barton quotes Foucault’s argument that:

the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the [individual] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of

power...the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action.²⁶

Barton utilizes his point and links the idea of the panopticon, or the all-seeing eye, to the way conservative religious communities create the impression of always being a part of, watching over, and even policing the lives of individuals in the Bible Belt. Individuals practice what Barton calls “compulsory Christianity” or cultural, social, and religious exchanges and involvements that liken one’s sexual identity to one’s Christian identity through these interactions.²⁷ Individuals cannot remove themselves from compulsory Christianity because it permeates every aspect of life in the Bible Belt. However, while individuals often recognize and adhere to compulsory Christianity, the policing of the LGBT community and the community’s subsequent struggle to adhere to purportedly “Christian values” points towards the ongoing need to examine all facets of the gay rights movement, regardless of social or religious location.

One of the main reasons LGBT individuals struggle with acceptance in conservative religious communities is the strict adherence to the ideal of the literal interpretation of scripture. For example, Barton shows, through her interviews, how “Baptists and Pentecostals advocate a literal interpretation of scripture, both denouncing homosexuality as sinful and believing that answers to all of God’s mysteries may be found in the Bible.”²⁸ It is through this literal interpretation of the Bible that Bible Belt Christians – both homosexual and heterosexual – interact with each other. Thus, by repeatedly presenting their Christian identity on these terms, the pain and struggle of LGBT individuals emerge. Through these social interactions in small town life, Barton

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vantage Books).

²⁷ Bernadette Barton, *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

shows how colloquial Southern manners and embedded Christian norms serve as the foundation for both passive and active homophobia. Individuals face the difficult decision of either staying in what Barton identifies as “the toxic closet” or risking rejection from everything they’ve ever known.²⁹ Through the process of her interviews, Barton highlights the need to include the voices of LGBT individuals in the Bible Belt within the larger narrative of the gay rights movement. Conservative religious communities have crafted a unique regional LGBT identity worthy of inclusion in the larger gay rights conversation.

Challenging the inherent “heterosexual ideology of theology and the concept of God itself” and the relationships to queer lives was the systemic coming out process that theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid explores in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*.³⁰ Situated at the intersection of Latin American liberation theology, feminist theology, continental philosophy, and postcolonial and sexual theory, Althaus-Reid problematizes conservative theology as a sexual normative ideology and as acts aimed at bringing the reality of sexual desire into theological discourse as a process of liberation for all. Althaus-Reid’s groundbreaking work confronts the religious ideology that is oftentimes the backdrop of conservative and fundamentalist traditions. Althaus-Reid claims that Latin American theology mutilates symbolic knowledge through the metanarratives of European conquerors. Indecent theology, to her, represents “a shift in the structure of sexual feelings which

²⁹ Ibid., 109.

³⁰ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*.

disrobes the underwear of heterosexual theology [and is] a kind of coming-out process in which we are no longer (hetero)sexually neutral theologians.”³¹

Althaus-Reid challenges the concept of heteronormative God-talk and problematizes theological and political hegemony through the subversive questioning of sacred characters, beliefs, and practices with profane reexaminations. Althaus-Reid challenges accepted theology and ideals that have permeated into every facet of our culture and society today by making claims that questions Jesus’s sexuality and other types of indecent reexaminations that force a change in the power dynamics of churches and Christian authorities.

Much like Barton and Althaus-Reid, scholar Mark Jordan tracks the rhetoric conservative evangelical Christians have used to oppose homosexuality. Jordan argues that conservative religious rhetoric has been reformulated to highlight the nonfactual concerns that wrongly construe LGBT individuals as people who are recruiting members to the gay rights movement. Historically showing the linguistic formation of the term homosexual, Jordan examines the way figures such as Anita Bryant, Jerry Falwell, and Paul Cameron, talked about homosexuality, as well as the ways their personal ideologies were absorbed into society. Jordan shows the danger in how:

American churches had to learn a bewildering series of new characters, but also how to talk publicly and persistently about a range of topics they had tried hard to keep silent – or at least pastorally private. Across the half century of debates, churches learned how to speak about same-sex desire, but only by negotiating and renegotiating their relationship to a new rhetoric of sex and gender that they did not launch...The most effective American rhetoric for condemning civil or religious toleration of homosexuality has repeatedly warned of danger to the young.³²

³¹ Ibid.,

³² Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*.

The critical aspect of Jordan's argument reexamines conservative religious communities' use of the idea that individuals can "love the sinner [and] hate the sin." Through agreeing that the phrase itself is a paradox that presents a negative effect on LGBT individuals, Jordan identifies it as a phrase used to lure in vulnerable adolescents within conservative religious traditions who are struggling with their identity. Jordan points out that the phrase is also used to keep these young adolescents away from publicly accepting their homosexuality and living an open life outside of the proverbial closet that these conservative religious traditions reinforce and demand they stay in.

Jordan provides insight into the development of conservative Christian arguments about homosexuality and points out that those individuals struggling with their sexuality are often silenced. However, it is in this silence, that Jordan pinpoints a critical bridge that could be developed between the gay rights movement and conservative religious communities if their voices did not go unheard. Jordan shows, through a series of interviews, that the connection to both communities (gay and religious) offers new pragmatic and rhetorical insights that scholars have yet to unlock when studying the lives and experiences of LGBT individuals in conservative religious communities. Although Jordan's book is not "an institutional or social history of queer lives in Christian churches," like Barton's work, and is "not an intellectual history of theological ideas, their sources, and influences," like Althaus-Reid's work is, it does offer a sequence of rhetorical tableaux showcasing how rhetoric dictates daily lives, actions, and social histories, of not only the majority but also the minority.³³

³³ Ibid.,

Exploring the lives of LGBT individuals in conservative communities associates them with the idea of normalcy. Michael Warner argues that in these contexts sexual norms are assumed to represent the natural order and are not culturally or socially questioned. In *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Warner points out how the monolithic nature of sexual norms has become a “politics of shame” that has, in turn, created a “hierarchy of shame,” put in place to prevent sexual heterogeneity and non-binary identities from developing.³⁴ Like Jordan, Warner argues that the AIDS crisis added to the complexity that existed between the identities and sexual acts of homosexuals, leading them to be defined as immoral and used as political and religious pawns in the politics of shame.

Warner believes that sexuality, due to its un-static nature, is constantly in formation, which is why it is seen in juxtaposition to communities, such as conservative religious teachings, that teach stagnant ideologies that administer how individuals should behave and act.³⁵ Advocating for sexual autonomy through “new freedoms, new experiences, new pleasures, new identities, [and] new bodies...the trouble with normal” is that it is something that everyone wants but no one can ever achieve.³⁶ Individuals and communities that are seen as in-charge can attempt to police the actions of those in the minority through hierarchies of shame. Through the actions and desires of LGBT individuals who wish to get married or serve in the military, Warner argues that the conservative idea of normal has even penetrated into a liberation movement that stands

³⁴ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

in direct opposition to conservative individuals and conservative groups who do not agree with their struggle.

Although the idea of normal may appear to be good for those who stand in the majority, for Warner, the need to be or appear normal is part of the same type of regulation that conservative religious communities use to silence the voices of LGBT individuals. Though the politics of shame may not have boundaries when it comes to its policing effect, its use is to first and foremost subjugate people who sit in the position of the minority in opposition of a vocal majority. Through the religious framing of sexuality as normal, those who sit on the periphery of normalcy and larger society are forced to look at a specific culture and community without fully being able to take part in it due to their sexual or gender identity.

Including the voices of individuals and communities in conservative religious traditions has greatly benefited queer, feminist, gender, and sexuality studies. The voices of individuals who are often overlooked and further oppressed as a result of their religious patronage are beneficial to breaking down further barriers that separate the gay rights movement from religion. The promulgation of religious rhetoric and norms has permeated our daily actions and can be seen on all levels of society and culture. To use the title from Michael Warner's book, the trouble with normal is that certain groups attempt to emphasize it in order to police the lives not of the majority but of the minority. The lived experiences and histories of LGBT individuals is vital in combatting the idea of normal and continuing the fight for those people in conservative religious communities who are unable to speak up, fight back, or even profess their devotion to their loved ones without retribution, regardless of their gender.

It is worth noting that a large portion of church histories that documented various forms of homophobia have been deleted from countless archives as an attempt to *erase* that part of their history. However, there are a growing number of former members in more open and affirming religious spaces, or current members of these conservative traditions, with a willingness to engage in a dialogue with religiously-orientated non-profit organizations.³⁷ In *Recruiting Young Love*, Jordan states that through his research into the rhetoric and recorded speeches of Christians leaders who promulgated HIV/AIDS as a “gay disease,” he found that many had been erased from church records and archives as an attempt to (1) hide outrageous pronouncements about HIV/AIDS and (2) protect successors within these religious traditions who no longer wanted to claim a connection to these ideas.³⁸ These ongoing and constructive dialogues allow religious organizations to “suspend judgment so that they can be present to whatever God is doing in [a] person’s life” and provide space for LGBT individuals to be open and willing enough to explore these new relationships if they so choose to.³⁹

Chapter Outline

Chapter One, “My Love is Homosexual’ – Early Homophile Community Building and Religious Disconnect,” draws upon interviews with major stakeholders within the LGBT community in order to identify and trace the evolution of the community’s historical landscapes. This chapter further explores religious pluralism in America in regards to non-traditional forms of spirituality within LGBT communities, particularly in

³⁸ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

relation to gay men. Additionally, it surveys the various methodological considerations and existing sources in the academic study of LGBT and religious communities already present from post-Stonewall studies. This chapter briefly sets the cultural, religious, and political landscapes of the late 1960s and explores how LGBT individuals and communities were viewed not only by society at large but also by religious and faith-based groups. Informed by historian and scholar John D’Emilio’s thesis, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, this first chapter investigates the creation of a gay and lesbian subculture and describes the new communal and gathering spaces such as bars, clubs, and bathhouses that replaced the traditional church spaces.⁴⁰ D’Emilio argues that as a result of capitalism, gays and lesbians were able to successfully hold jobs that could support their lifestyles within the new urban landscapes.⁴¹ As heterosexual families moved to the suburbs to adhere to the nuclear family ideal, gay men and women stayed within the urban and city landscapes and thrived.⁴² As a result, gays and lesbians began to foreground their lifestyles and create new spaces that could sustain not only their but also their sexual identities. As a result of LGBT people being able to choose their communities without fear of retribution, new methods and avenues were created for them to worship and gather openly.

Chapters Two, “I Don’t Have Stepsons and Stepdaughters: Religion, AIDS, Death, and Community” investigates the impact leading religious figures had on American culture, while bettering understanding of the important role the Religious Right

⁴⁰ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁴¹ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.

⁴² D’Emilio’s study does not focus on members of the bisexual and transgender community but it should be noted that they were also seeking to create and sustain communities in similar fashions.

played in developing and influencing conservatism from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. This chapter utilizes more interviews on the role HIV/AIDS played in the lives of the LGBT individuals interviewed throughout this dissertation. This chapter segues into a brief history of how HIV/AIDS was culturally and religiously defined as a “gay disease” or plague cast down as judgment from God for immoral behavior. I examine the use of such rhetoric by first introducing responses from my interviewees about these topics. How do LGBT individuals tackle their place in religious and faith-based spaces if they are made to feel like they are victims of a judgment from God? How do they replace shame with acceptance? How can LGBT individuals forgive religious and faith-based leaders for telling them they are going to die and go to hell one day and then the next be asked to help lead in the respective traditions’ fight to end HIV/AIDS globally? Ultimately, is religion responsible for equating HIV/AIDS with LGBT individuals or specifically gay men? I address through my interview process a better understanding of the struggle and ongoing fight for LGBT rights during the HIV/AIDS crisis at its onset and during the height of the pandemic.

Chapter Three, “A Different Kind of Community: Finding, Fighting for, and Creating Community” explores the ways my interviewees found and fought for their chosen communities by charting the various experiences of Bishop Gene Robinson, Reverend Nancy Wilson, Carolyn Weathers, Reverend Albert Stephen Pieters, Jeffrey Hoepfner, Dr. Marie Cartier, and others whose stories we encountered in the first two chapters. After coming out about their sexuality, many of my subjects faced undue scrutiny within their religious communities, resulting in attempts to either find a way to balance the two or to hide their sexuality from their spiritual community. Conservative

religious leaders both within their communities and in the public sphere shaped many of the negative experiences they felt when coming out. As a result, many of my interviewees either chose to leave the religious community they were born into in search of more open and accepting ones or they charted and created their own. Throughout this chapter, the theme of community is central to the lives of individuals fleeing persecution and oppression as a result of their sexuality. This chapter contends that as a result of such ostracization, my subjects sought out new communities outside of the religious communities and faiths they were born into as they accepted their own sexuality. Most importantly, this chapter shows that as the LGBT rights movement became more open and public, it offered new forms of community that were accepting and open.

Chapter Four, “Out, Faithful, and Transgressing: Community, LGBT Identity, and Religion,” investigates how openly religious or faithful individuals dealt with their relationship to their sexual identity. Throughout my interviews, we frequently discussed how they navigated their religious beliefs and sexuality, especially when the latter put them at odds with their religious communities or faith traditions. For example, many of my interviewees grappled with coming out to their devout families or religious communities. However, questions about their ability to negotiate internal feelings about sexuality with their faith were superseded by both their unwavering belief in God as well as the conviction that they were neither damned nor sinful for being LGBT. While speaking up or expressing themselves in specific ways in religious settings often led to a variety of conflicts, they still defined their agency as a contradictory force that they grappled with on a daily basis in order to exist within homophobic or non-progressive

religions. This study explores, through my interviews how the anti-gay rhetoric LGBT people heard at the national level from leading figures like Falwell influenced similar figures at the local level, it also forced both open and closeted individuals to grapple with either staying in their specific traditions to work for reform on the inside or leaving altogether.

Outcomes

The goal of this dissertation is to re-write religion back into the narrative of the LGBT movement, thus providing a more comprehensive examination of the divide between sexuality and spirituality. Part of this is understanding how individuals bridge conflicting identities to help achieve a community that is supportive and empowering.⁴³ This dissertation and the inroads it creates explore the new roles the LGBT movement took on in place of religious and faith-based communities during heightened times of homophobia.⁴⁴ The new discourse behind the LGBT rights movement's recent popularity and credibility in U.S. popular culture created a generation of activists who grew up both within and outside of religious communities that affirmed an individual's sexuality as an important part of their identity rather than a sinful one. While newer generations of both closeted and open LGBT individuals and religiously-affiliated men and women grew up knowing about the fight for and against gay marriage, equal rights, and fair and non-discriminatory treatment, the battle for LGBT equality was reduced, through various mediums like the media, the internet, and popular culture, to a battle

⁴³ Ibid., xiv.

⁴⁴ A full list of interview questions, ranging in both time period and group, can be found in the Notes section.

between religion and the LGBT movement.⁴⁵ As such, this dissertation seeks to unravel the stories behind the various struggles each community, both religious and LGBT affiliated, has undergone – or is currently undergoing – around the issue of marriage equality and the inclusion of LGBT individuals in religious communities and traditions. Through including the voices of both religious and non-religious LGBT individuals, new constructive and effective discourses are developed that can further bridge the divide between religion and sexuality rather than create a wider gap.

Ultimately this dissertation explores the various reasons LGBT individuals either chose to stay in churches that promulgated homophobic rhetoric or chose to leave. Based on the experiences recounted in in-person interviews, even though conservative religious traditions may have caused great harm to the LGBT community, they, in the end, helped create the impetus for what we now refer to as the modern-day LGBT movement. If individuals had never been forced out and left to look elsewhere for a welcoming and meaningful community that validated both their sexuality and spirituality, the LGBT landscape of the 21st century would look drastically different

⁴⁵ “Gay Rights and the Church’s Evolving Role,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 2011.

CHAPTER ONE

“My Love is Homosexual”: Early Homophile Community Building and Religious Disconnect

The Gay Revolution

Lillian Faderman’s most recent book, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of Struggle*, chronicles the struggle for LGBT rights from the early 1950s to the early 21st century. Although most of her book recounts intimate stories of LGBT individuals’ experiences coming of age in an ever-changing American political, social, and religious landscape, many of Faderman’s ethnographic vignettes center around the idea of community (or lack thereof). Given this, it is no wonder that her immediate answer to my initial question about how the LGBT and religious communities were shaped by or shaped each other, either positively or negatively, challenged many of the themes mainstream society currently accepts about the relationship between LGBT and religious groups:

In the 1950s there were practically no churches, or synagogues for that matter, that were open to gay people. I think the one exception was Los Angeles’ Unitarian Church and I think even in the 50s they were very open to the homosexual community. In fact, [the Unitarian Church in Los Angeles] even hosted the Mattachine’s first so-called National Convention...the Unitarian Church in Los Angeles at that time, opened the doors of the church to gay people, but that was just a lone example. Outside of that, there were no churches or synagogues that were sympathetic to homosexuals.⁴⁶

As Faderman describes, for those living outside of Los Angeles – or perhaps also San Francisco – there was a notable lack of inclusive, safe, and accepting spaces and communities for homosexuals to congregate. This created a real lack of space and community for LGBT individuals throughout the majority of the U.S. and contributed to the early disconnect between the “ideas of the churches and the homosexuals.”⁴⁷ Two

⁴⁶ Lillian Faderman, interview by author, November 2014.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

camps began to form as early as the 1950s, forcing LGBT individuals to either be open about their sexuality, regardless of whether or not they were open to their friends and family, or remain closeted and faithful to the ideas of their religious traditions, which were often at odds with their sexuality. LGBT people internalized this disconnect between their sexuality and spirituality, creating a sense of internalized homophobia that would, as Faderman said: “Say that my sexuality or my lifestyle or my love is homosexual, but this religious part of me is something entirely different.”⁴⁸

This chapter draws upon interviews with major stakeholders within the LGBT community in order to identify and trace the evolution of the community’s historical landscapes. In *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, John D’Emilio argues that the creation of a gay and lesbian subculture in communal gathering spaces – such as bars, clubs, and bathhouses – aided in replacing traditional church spaces.⁴⁹ D’Emilio argues that as a result of capitalism, gays and lesbians were able to successfully hold jobs that could support their lifestyles within the new urban landscapes.⁵⁰ As heterosexual families moved to the suburbs to adhere to the ideal of the nuclear family, gay men and women stayed within urban landscapes and thrived. As a result, gays and lesbians began to foreground their lifestyles and create new spaces that could sustain their sexual identities. I trace the socio-sexual and religious spaces in which many LGBT individuals, including my interviewees, experienced community and, for once, felt accepted by individuals regardless of who they were or how they identified. Faderman expanded upon this point when she stated:

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.

⁵⁰ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.

In earlier eras when people would have looked to the church for community, [they] had to hide that aspect of themselves. Once a larger community emerged, they didn't have to look to the church for community, they could be part of this larger community and express the gay aspect of themselves that they would have had to hide before.⁵¹

The emerging LGBT rights movement created spaces in the context of their sheer necessity; LGBT individuals were being forced out of their religious communities as a result of experiencing both social and religious stigma because of their sexual or gender identities.

Dr. David Gushee, a high-profile Evangelical ethicist/theologian, speaking on homophobia in Christianity at the 2014 national conference of The Reformation Project stated: "The Church has inflicted a damaging and ultimately unchristlike body of teaching against sexual minorities."⁵² As a result, these "damaging and unchristlike" teachings caused conflicts between LGBT individuals and religious groups and ultimately compelled them to take refuge in groups formed after the free love and anti-war movement of the 1960s, which mimicked left-wing militant behaviors rather than the teachings of Christianity or other religious traditions like eastern spirituality.

There is a significant gap in religious LGBT history that has not been adequately addressed due to both generational divides and the lack of personal narratives of major stakeholders. D'Emilio sums up this absence by describing many of the "qualifications" that LGBT individuals found themselves having to identify with in order to be in these new left-wing groups of the 1970s because "[they] tended to define religion as one of the key agents of oppression."⁵³ Members of these groups and communities were able

⁵¹ Faderman, interview, November 2014.

⁵² John D'Emilio, "Religion Is Calling," <http://outhistory.org/blog/religion-is-calling/>, (November 12, 2014).

⁵³ Ibid.

to “embrace their own homosexuality or gender identity by personally rejecting religion.”⁵⁴ As a result, researchers who “excavate the histories of self-consciously dissident sexual communities or movements of resistance were unlikely to put religion front and center” because religion didn’t matter or factor into these groups at all, which caused the historical gap that this dissertation seeks to fill.⁵⁵

A Case Study in Early Homophile Community: Radical Faeries & Daughters of Bilitis

This dissertation explores religious pluralism in America in regards to non-traditional forms of spirituality within LGBT communities, particularly in relation to gay men. One example of this comes from the Radical Faerie community, a counter-cultural group that has attempted to create a space outside of traditional religious culture, where religious and sexuality identities can be molded together as an empowering agent for individual believers. This runs counter to the ostracizing forces utilized by the hierarchal and heteropatriarchal religious groups traditionally found during the early 1950s and 1960s. Differentiating the “love the sinner, hate the sin” ideal that caused LGBT communities to leave and form their own sacred spaces is a vital step in creating new methods that both scholars and activists can utilize to include sexuality in the equation of both religious pluralism and religious empowerment for communities who are told they are either damned or going to hell.

The Radical Faeries movement has been intricately involved in shaping and working with LGBT individuals interested in reclaiming their spirituality and sexuality as

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

one empowering identity rather than the sinful behavior promulgated by mainstream religious groups. The core mission of the Radical Faeries is to reject hetero-imitation and redefine gender and sexual identity through spirituality. Starting as a counter-cultural movement in the sexual revolution of the 1970s, the Radical Faerie subculture challenges modern-day assumptions about LGBT identity within mainstream commercialized and patriarchal cultures. Engaging New Age and Neopagan spirituality, the Radical Faerie movement evolved from a small gathering of men at the 1979 Spiritual Conference for Radical Fairies in Arizona, who explored the ways gay men could merge spirituality and gay liberation, into a full-scale, international spiritual and social organization that expresses a wide range of genders, sexual orientations, and identities. Radical faerie communities retreated from urban, heteropatriarchal society and returned to nature as a way to reclaim their identities from mainstream culture, which they believed had co-opted them, and created a space where they could both cleanse and heal their religious, social, and physical wounds.

In the article “Arrival at Home: Radical Faerie Configurations of Sexuality and Place,” Scott Lauria Morgensen discusses the importance of the Radical Faerie communities forming gatherings in nature as an integral step in their reclamation of subjectivity through nature rather than by social, sexual, gender, and religious norms. Morgensen states:

The founders of the Radical Faeries formed gatherings and sanctuaries as sources for the discovery by gay men of an authentic gay subjectivity. Radical faeries today diversely represent the senses of self they gain at gatherings or sanctuaries. But the radical faerie founders argued that authentic gay subjectivity derives from a biological or spiritual nature, which they claimed was

recognized first in indigenous societies that honored gay men as bearers of spiritual insight.⁵⁶

Reclaiming the ways that gay men were able to experience and interpret their own lives, free of the hate rhetoric they were experiencing in the outside world, provided them with the tools they needed to feel empowered as a result of their own personal agency rather than disempowered by the homophobic societies they were forced to live in. Gay men who embraced the Radical Faerie movement were able to transform their identities in a space where they determined their own subjectivity and then took that back to world they had to exist in, either as closeted or openly gay men; or to utilize the words of Faderman herself, “they found ways to discover new beliefs that accepted their sexual identity.”⁵⁷

The Daughters of Bilitis was the first national lesbian political and social organization in the United States. Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin began meeting other female couples and friends to discuss issues impacting not only the larger homophile community but also, and more specifically, lesbian issues. Adopting more political goals than social ones, the Daughters of Bilitis began in 1951 in Los Angeles and quickly became a communal force for gay female members of the homophile community who could not identify with the goals of the Mattachine Society, which was predominately male identified. Both groups were equally important in furthering homophile activities of the 1950s and 60s in order to shed light on a growing community oftentimes demonized in general society.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Arrival at Home: Radical Faerie Configurations of Sexuality and Place,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15:1 (2009): 68.

⁵⁷ Faderman, Lilian

⁵⁸ Phyllis Lyon, “Lesbian Liberation Begins,” *The Gay and Lesbian Review* (2012).

Although the group found success, their mission differed from that of the Radical Faeries because they preached more assimilation than radicalization. Through their monthly magazine, *The Ladder*, the group published poetry, essays, and other topical posts about homosexuality not found in mainstream circulations. Much like the criticism of the LGBT community today, the group was small and the outreach was primarily focused on white, middle-class women. Their messaging failed to appeal to a broad base of women who wanted to achieve a more radical perspective in a time when homosexuals were fearful of losing their jobs over their sexuality. The Daughters of Bilitis began to shift from lesbian rights to women's rights as the conversation began to publicly shift during the post-war, free love movement of the 1960s, prior to the reemergence of the religious right and the conservative Republican wave of the late 1970s and 80s. However, the women's rights movement was slow to embrace lesbians generally and their expulsion from the Second Congress to Unite Women in New York City on May 1, 1970, proved devastating to the Daughters of Bilitis. With the magazine ceasing to publish as a result of an internal coup and the organization's inability to find common ground between the women's and lesbian movements of the 1960s and 70s, the group did not survive. They officially ended publication of *The Ladder* in 1972 and smaller offshoots ceased to exist without the functioning of the main arm of the organization.⁵⁹

While the Daughters of Bilitis may not have served the same role in early homophile community building as the Radical Faeries did, their importance in LGBT history still stands to this day. Many of the members quickly associated with other

⁵⁹ Ibid.

groups and provided crucial role in fighting for other reforms, such as civil rights, lesbian visibility, and caring for their gay brothers during the HIV/AIDS crisis.⁶⁰

Early Signs of Disconnect: AIDS and the Early Homophile Community

Chosen communities became integral to the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Organizations like the Radical Faeries and the former Daughters of Bilitis became saviors for gay men who had nowhere or no one to turn to for support. The increase of Radical Faerie gatherings following its initial founding in 1979 was a direct response to the increase in HIV/AIDS-related deaths during the 1980s. As a result of their members being primarily gay men, Radical Faerie culture became synonymous with the AIDS epidemic because their gatherings were now not only a sanctified place where spirituality and sexuality were blended together for empowerment, but also a site for permanent memories to the Radical Faeries who died of AIDS. These sanctified spaces became increasingly impactful in the lives of gay men and evolved from being local gatherings to holy sites where:

Radical Faeries could return to recommit to collective survival and sanctify the memory of lost friends, now imagined as part of the spiritual power of Radical Faerie lands. In these ways and more, sanctuaries assured radical faeries that, although most lived far away, their community and spirituality remained intimately and permanently tied [together].⁶¹

Radical Faeries molded sexuality and spirituality together to form an empowering gay spirituality and church space that allowed them to reclaim their identities from the predisposed sinful nature that mainstream heteropatriarchal religions promulgated.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Morgensen, "Arrival at Home," 84.

One of the many ways that the Radical Faerie community began to reconstruct and heal both individuals afflicted AIDS and those indirectly affected was through rituals. New Age and Neopagan rituals were utilized by the Radical Faerie community because of the ways they explored gender dynamics and sexuality within the context of spirituality. Sarah M. Pike, in *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* discusses the attraction of these new religious movements to countercultural and minority groups.

Pike states:

[New Age and Neopagan] rituals and healing practices [explored] gender dynamics and [aimed] to change imbalances of power and abusive behavior. Workshops and rituals exploring masculinity and femininity, celebrating sacred sexuality, healing sexual wounds, and overcoming destructive gender conditioning [were] common at Neopagan and New Age events.⁶²

LGBT groups responded to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the only ways they could see fit: promoting physical and spiritual healing alongside their activism. Spirituality became a tool that the Radical Faerie movement utilized to bring solace to those individuals living with and dying from HIV/AIDS. As a result, they greatly affected not only the ways in which gay men viewed the disease but also how they lived with it.

As a result of the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, counter-cultural groups like the Radical Faeries had to both combat the ways in which LGBT identity fit into religious dialogue and figure out how to deconstruct the conservative assertion that HIV/AIDS was a plague only affecting gay men as a result of their sinful lifestyles. One of the main ways that the Radical Faerie community combated the negative social and religious rhetoric that HIV/AIDS was a gay disease was to ensure that “people’s faith experiences [were] constructed in a way [that] allowed them to feel more spiritually

⁶² Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 115.

connected” during times were silence literally equaled death.⁶³ By grounding gay men in both emotional and spiritual unions, Radical Faeries “countered their religious embattlement while facing death [and] survival.”⁶⁴ While moral attacks on American gay men by conservative Christian movements demanded their silence, the actions of Radical Faeries offered a “fully realized spirituality that affirmed gay men and answered back to [the larger] battle,” that was being developed as a result of the HIV/AIDS crisis and its ties to gay male community.

The Radical Faeries movement does not have an organized structure or a book of set doctrines or core values. It did, however, utilize healing rituals that came from counter-cultural movements and “evolved out of the principles of ecology, gay liberation, feminist theory, antiracism, and anarchism” in order to maintain their sacred space in both natural and urban areas even at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s. While the crisis took a severe toll on the gay male community, the work the Radical Faeries helped to bond sexuality and spirituality together to form a version of gay spirituality that gave them the strength to continue the fight against both hateful rhetoric and a disease that was destroying their community. As a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, gatherings gained a greater significance in sustaining gay culture:

Radical Faerie culture promoted qualities that would appear in primary and secondary HIV prevention education. Breaking isolation and fostering empowered identities and emotional communication were promoted by educators to help people choose to keep themselves and others healthy, whether or not they lived with HIV.⁶⁵

⁶³ Bradley Smith and Sharon Home, “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) Experience with Earth-Spirited Faith,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 52:3-4 (2007): 237.

⁶⁴ Morgensen, “Arrival at Home,” 86.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

Radical faeries became involved in both the spiritual and personal responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Much like the formation of ACT Up in 1987 to combat the lack of action or acknowledgment of the AIDS crisis by political, social, and religious organizations, the Radical Faerie community was now responsible for changing the spiritual and sexual narrative as well as educating and empowering people who were being adversely affected as a result of HIV/AIDS. Now, Radical Faeries experienced more than just a spiritual journey: they also offered a method of survival.

One of the main rituals that Radical Faerie gatherings utilized after the initial HIV/AIDS outbreak was a heart circle, which invited gay men into a circle to communicate openly and authentically from their proverbial hearts. Heart circles “invited gay men to articulate feelings tied to illness, death, loss, survival [and] to receive aid from comrades who shared their struggles [in order to] strengthen [their] common identity by tracing their stories to similar roots.”⁶⁶ Straddling the line between despair and survival, heart circles modeled a basis of Radical Faerie culture that focused on furthering the spiritual journey of its followers as well as helping them come to terms and cope with death free of the idea that gay people, as a result of their sinful nature, would go to hell. The heart circle helped retrace the lineage between Radical Faeries, both alive and dead, to reestablish new spiritual bonds that were free of the heteronormative portrayal of gay men as sinners. The heart circle reaffirmed the personal spiritual journey that the Radical Faeries were on and helped empower them to believe that there was life after death, regardless of how tumultuous and physically debilitating their current life might have been. In this way, heart circles “acted as an

⁶⁶ Ibid.

emblem and tool of a natural, reliable, and enduring solidarity promised by radical faerie subjectivity, [gay spirituality], and sociality” amidst the HIV/AIDS crisis.⁶⁷

The Emergence of Gay Spirituality and Gay Church Communities

The gay church movement of the late 1960s and 1970s laid the groundwork for emerging religious practitioners to help individuals reclaim both religious and spiritual identities as a singular self-expression rather than two identities in conflict with each other. The intersection between sexual identity and religion has oftentimes been a point of contention when seeking out new alliances and methods for the establishment of queer friendly spaces within religious institutions. Heather Rachelle White, in “Proclaiming Liberation: The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946-1976,” states:

Constructed and expressed gay religious identity [is] an intrinsic – even divinely created – part of the self. Such a conception of identity countered opposing Christians’ charge that homosexuality was a sinful behavior, and [provided] the medium for reclaiming religious traditions that condemned homosexuality and gender variance.⁶⁸

Ranging from queer-identified religious communities such as Kinship (Seventh-day Adventist) to Orthodykes (Orthodox Jews), religious homophile movements before the Stonewall Riots of 1969 worked to become a medium for reclaiming aspects of life that the growing gay rights movement forgot. While the mainstream gay rights movement attempted to politicize the fight for sexual equality in the public sphere, the religious homophile movement concentrated on changing the private narrative of LGBT rights within religious institutions. The act of not separating sexual and religious identity was

⁶⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁸ Heather Rachelle White, “Proclaiming Liberation: The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946-1976,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11:4 (2008): 103.

both strategic and historically significant as more religious leaders began to come out of the proverbial closet and work for change either within their present historical structure or, as a result, form their own congregations.

With the emergence of gay churches came the need to define gay spirituality as both a movement and a core set of beliefs. Gay spirituality is both a tool that the “secular gay world [utilizes] in an attempt at securing moral legitimacy [and agency] for homosexual behavior” and a medium for LGBT individuals to fulfill their spiritual needs that are not congruent with mainstream Christianity or gay culture.⁶⁹ Often seen as being at war with one another, the secular world of gay culture is not as incongruent with heteropatriarchal and heteronormative religious institutions (re: Catholicism, the Black Church, Mormonism, or Islam) but rather already an imbedded aspect within each of these specific traditions.⁷⁰ The emergence of LGBT individuals within religious traditions signifies that gay culture did not exist outside of religious structures but rather was already a part of the historical narrative and progression of these respective religious traditions.

The emergence of LGBT individuals within religious culture provided the framework that the founders of the Radical Faerie movement needed to begin coming together as a counter-cultural group. As mentioned above, in 1979, gay men from all walks of life gathered for the first Spiritual Conference of Radical Faeries, which signified a form of “gay church” created by like-minded individuals who chose to be in community with one another via empowering spiritual connections. Founder Harry Hay

⁶⁹ White, “Proclaiming Liberation,” 107.

⁷⁰ While this list is not comprehensive, it is indicative of a large sample of religious traditions who already have LGBT individuals within their traditions, whether they are open or not about their sexuality or gender identity.

and other leaders created this summer weekend event, which initially drew over 200 urban men to a retreat in the Arizona desert.⁷¹ Morgensen states:

White men from urban and middle-class gay communities became the core constituents of radical faerie networks...Radical faerie culture formed to reflect gay men's lives [of the time and]...thus traverses the material and cultural legacies of [religious] colonization by investigating rural spaces as sources of liberating sexuality among the radicalized subjected of a settler [religious] society.⁷²

Utilizing their identities to merge spirituality into gay culture signified the important and empowering task that Hay and other early gay rights advocates faced during their attempt to establish not only gay spirituality but a quasi-organization that focused on liberating individuals, primarily gay men, from the ostracizing crisis of being open or closeted within both their private and public lives. Utilizing the rural spaces that they believed to be free from the predisposed social, sexual, and religious norms that they faced within traditional church spaces, Radical Faeries strategically returned to indigenous and Earth-spirited faiths that they believed could empower rather than disempower them. Becoming active agents in redefining their own sexual and religious identities in accordance with belief systems that they constructed tied gay men's subjectivity not only to themselves but also to the communities they represented.

Gay spirituality in non-traditional church or religious communities constituted rituals from past religious experiences molded into supportive frameworks that empowered gay men to find ways to experience religion. Offering an "attractive alternative," many individuals "maintained belief [because] they were focused more on

⁷¹ Morgensen, "Arrival at Home," 68.

⁷² Ibid., 68-9.

the individual *experience* of spiritual connectedness with nature at the core.”⁷³

Reconnecting with nature served both as a metaphysical as well as a personal healing experience for the men coming to the Radical Faerie gatherings. The importance placed on ritual sanctified the rural gathering by redefining what traditional church space meant when removed from contexts of traditional worship styles and locations. The outdoor space was thus transformed from a simple rural gathering to a sacred space by “creating emotional communions in the supportive context of a world of gay spirituality.”⁷⁴

These outdoor spaces became a transcendent area in which gay spirituality was constructed through the process of both communion with nature and the community of men who retreated from their urban landscapes. Morgensen, who spent a substantial amount of time with the Radical Faeries at one of their annual gatherings noted:

[The] naturalization into our [surroundings] is precisely why [the Radical Faeries] present a crucial image for imagining how a global and transhistorical nature provides gay men at the gathering a basis and context for finding self-love and social acceptance...Gatherings produce Radical Faerie subjectivity...by forming an ultimately portable subjectivity...[Gatherings] indicate that the portability of Radical Faerie subjectivity crucially articulates particular lands, which may be called to mind after gatherings end and participants disperse as key sites where Radical Faerie desires for liberation are sustained.⁷⁵

The gay men who came to the gatherings developed a new type of church space that was both portable and localized in the community from which it originated. Radical Faeries localized church space as an internal concept that gay men could take back to their urban homes to continue their spiritual journey. Ultimately, this shift was strategic because it gave individuals who were not public with their sexuality the ability to worship

⁷³ Smith and Home, “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) Experience with Earth-Spirited Faith,” 236.

⁷⁴ Morgensen, “Arrival at Home,” 82.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

in the privacy of their own homes. This tactic was similar to the ways that gay men were forced to remain closeted about their lifestyles for the fear of retribution by a society that treated them as outcasts.

The Radical Faerie movement molded spirituality and sexuality together within the individual believer by utilizing the private home space as a catalyst for continuing their religious journey. While the private space of the home was at one point a dark and lonely sphere where gay men existed because they could not be public with their sexuality, it eventually, as a result of the Radical Faerie and other religious homophile movements, became a space where LGBT individuals could converse with a higher power and not feel quite as alone as they may have once felt. Like the gathering itself, gay spirituality, within the context of the Radical Faeries movement became a sanctuary that grew across the United States into a powerful movement. It “promised gay men refuge from embattled lies in phobic society while making rural land a medium for renewing spirituality at its source.”⁷⁶ However, the localization of sanctuary within the actual individuals as well as the spaces they occupied were strategic in changing the mediums in which gay men were able to both worship and experience a connection to a higher power. By existing within phobic societies, gay men began to change the normative social, religious, and sexual values around them in addition to showing that gay spirituality was not only valuable, but also a historical movement that has always existed within the context of religious structures. While gay men returned to nature to reclaim their spirituality, it was also an intentional return to the roots of both religion and

⁷⁶ Ibid.

practice, showcasing that religion did not have to be an ostracizing force, but could be an empowering one that gay men needed to reclaim if they were to survive.

Creating the Space: Gay Religious Community

When trying to chronicle the diversity present within American religious history, many historians have struggled with what groups to include while the groups themselves have to negotiate whether or not they wanted to be included in the broader narrative that is American religious history. The Radical Faerie movement was first established as a counter-cultural movement. Therefore, attempting to fit them into the larger narrative of American religious history works both for and against their original mission and the members who have devoted themselves to reshaping religious experience and spirituality in the context of LGBT identity. However, a major argument of this dissertation is that the Radical Faerie movement has been a part of the American religious history landscape regardless of whether or not they wanted to be because of their nature. While all religious groups are part of the cultural stew and can serve as pillars within society by standing up for a certain set of core beliefs, Radical Faeries, serve as counter-cultural agents attempting to be and remain indistinguishable from any established or mainstream culture or religious movements that seeks to codify specific experiences.

In attempting to show how Americanized ideas of the nation state and Protestantism developed side-by-side to eventually create the liberal nation state, Nathan Hatch signifies the possibility for radical shifts to occur throughout American culture and religious groups. In their attempt to remain outside of the larger historical

narrative, the Radical Faeries have, as a result of their responses to HIV/AIDS, gay spirituality, or sexual identity, become a part of the evolving religious narrative in America rather than the counter-cultural agents they wanted to be. While this may seem to be less effective to the mission of the Radical Faerie movement, in the end, it is because of their involvement that issues like gay spirituality and sexuality have successfully influenced both culture at large and the various ways that people act towards and think about LGBT individuals. The Radical Faeries have thus experienced the common struggle of counter-cultural groups to not become a part of mainstream culture. However, while they struggled to maintain their own identity, they made the lives of individuals struggling to understand the intersectionality of sexuality and spirituality a little easier.

Open and affirming groups that blended ways for LGBT people to be open about their sexuality and their spirituality helped chart new paths for gays and lesbians from all walks of life. For example, the open and affirming action of the General Synod of 1985 by the United Church of Christ was a milestone in publicly welcoming and accepting persons of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. This action, alongside those of other progressive groups that openly accepted LGBT people, worked to blend spirituality and sexuality together to redefine both traditional church spaces and religious identity. As a result of LGBT people being able to choose their communities without fear of retribution, new methods and avenues were created for them to worship openly.

CHAPTER TWO

Stepsons and Stepdaughters: Religion, AIDS, Death, and Community

On July 3, 1981, the *New York Times* reported that a rare cancer had been found in 41 homosexuals. Gay men in both Los Angeles and New York City had been diagnosed with this rare form of cancer.⁷⁷ Little did anyone know at the time, but the doctors had discovered a new disease that would soon claim the lives of countless gay men and women, creating a social and sexual rift in the world the likes of which had never been seen before. While little was known in the beginning stages of “the plague years” – a phrase commonly used to refer to the time when gay men were dying in droves with little or no response from medical or government professionals – AIDS would reshape not only how gay men saw themselves, but also how they would be viewed by the world at large.

In *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion*, Anthony Petro highlights a 1993 speech by Reverend Billy Graham – “America’s pastor” – where, in front of forty thousand people in Ohio, Graham asked: “Is AIDS a judgment from God?”⁷⁸ While Reverend Graham capitalized on the flourishing of religious, political, and social conservatism that took the country by storm in the late 1970s and 1980s, the conflation of AIDS and homosexuality started a war over words, lives, and religious identities. While Graham later apologized for his remarks, the deed from “America’s pastor” had already been done and the hesitance and silence of both the crowd and the American sociopolitical landscape spoke volumes.

⁷⁷ Altman, Lawrence, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

⁷⁸ Anthony Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Although Graham apologized, many gay Christians and non-religious LGBT individuals do not carry fond memories of him. Much like Graham, Jerry Falwell, another leading figure of the “moral majority,” also believed that AIDS was God’s judgment on America for enduring what he referred to as a “vulgar, perverted and reprobate lifestyle.”⁷⁹ Falwell was not just a straw figure that the LGBT community demonized for the sake of creating a villain. He was, by all means, a socially, politically, and religiously influential figure, but many in the LGBT community remember him primarily for promulgating narratives that demonized a community in the throes of an epidemic.⁸⁰ By developing and continuing this theme, Jerry Falwell incorporated a dangerous rhetoric that was adopted by countless others and harmed LGBT people at a time when the government, religious leaders, and the world at-large were unable or unwilling to deal with a disease that was regularly claiming thousands of individuals. While Falwell was busy directing his own message against the “perversions of gay men,” many others likened the HIV/AIDS pandemic to “divine judgment” due to his continual use of scripture to justify his message.⁸¹

In order to better understand why these leading religious figures had such a significant impact on American culture, we have to understand the important role the Religious Right played on developing and influencing conservatism from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. America’s churches are oftentimes the initial battleground for the social and political issues that take over our cultural zeitgeist. From abolition to Prohibition and Supreme Court decisions that restricted school prayers and upheld a woman’s right to abortion, the Religious Right awoke to the same style of “call to action”

⁷⁹ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 172.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

rhetoric that saw government encroaching into the personal and day-to-day lives of American citizens.

While many associate the rise of the Religious Right with the 1973 Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade*, the true origins can be traced to 1969 and responses to the desegregation of public schools throughout the South. Paul Weyrich, an American religious conservative political activist, saw the opportunity for a new political philosophy that served the specific interests of the Religious Right. Weyrich saw that the “new political philosophy must be defined by [conservatives] in moral terms, packaged in non-religious language, and propagated throughout the country by [a] new coalition.”⁸² Seeing the fight for the desegregation of public schools as a chance to reshape the Religious Right and what it represented to the growing coalition of conservative individuals both within and outside of the political realms, quickly shaped how American society viewed those who sat outside of hegemonic power and identity structures.

The desegregation of southern schools captured the attention of evangelical leaders, and their subsequent call to arms created an inroad for those who came to be identified with a “moral majority,” which Weyrich saw as a vehicle for change in a society that he regarded as both alien and immoral. His identification of other moral issues to organize around further fueled the activism that catapulted leaders like Billy Graham into the political spotlight and established them as influential figureheads representing American social and cultural norms. Weyrich wrote that, “the leadership, moral philosophy, and workable vehicle are at hand just waiting to be blended and activated,” thus signifying that through effective leadership the moral majority had

⁸² Randall Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right,” *Politico Magazine*, May 27, 2014.

enough power to classify entire groups of people in whatever way they wished. While the growth and importance of the moral majority and the Religious Right took years and involved many players, by publicly asking if AIDS was a judgment from God, Graham didn't simply pose a question, but rather issued an attack on the LGBT community, a group the Religious Right had been waging a war of words against for decades.

“Self-fulfilling Prophecies” and the Emancipation of Shame

Growing up as a gay child of the 90s in a small rustbelt community, seeing and experiencing the progression of LGBT activism, I remember that in addition to the fear of coming out to my family and friends about my sexuality, I carried the additional fear that I was going to die of AIDS. Sex education, after years of being erased from the public school system, didn't teach me anything about what it meant to be gay or to act on any of those feelings. I was taught silence; it was the best option to get through my adolescence, and it was only once I was safely away at college that I truly experienced what it meant to be myself.

While attempting to be silent, I came to fear my sexuality because I was never taught about those aspects of sexual health that could keep me safe and free from disease. After losing my virginity, I, like every other good gay boy, told my best friend, who happened to be female. While I should have been elated, the first thought that came to my mind was that I had contracted and would die from AIDS. In my mind it was an outcome of sexual intercourse rather than a virus that one partner had to already be infected with. It was only through my friend, whose uncle had died from AIDS-related complications years earlier, that I came to understand this important distinction. It was

like a light bulb turned on in my head: with one simple sentence, my friend alleviated a fear that I had carried with me for years.

I tell this story because it is important to understand that many LGBT people, while having to face simultaneous social, sexual, and gendered pressures, grow up fearing that their sexuality will eventually lead to their demise. Whether death comes from a hate crime or through the ravages of a disease that had been deemed through whispers, pop culture, and religion as the “gay disease,” LGBT people know and fear death much earlier than their heterosexual counterparts. During my interviews, I discovered a number of people who, like myself, always harbored the fear that they would contract and eventually fall victim to HIV/AIDS. The question of a “gay disease” is more than just an idea passed down from Rev. Graham, it is a question that continues to have an immeasurable impact on how LGBT people view themselves, their sexuality, and, ultimately, their mortality.

For many of my interviewees, this fear of death compelled them to seek out a community to provide the support they were denied elsewhere as a result of their sexuality. Quinn, a 34-year-old man who identifies as gay, grew up in North Dakota and was raised in the Baptist Church. He no longer identifies with that religious tradition but does consider himself spiritual. From very early on, Quinn was struck by the rhetoric invoked in his hometown and religious community about the connection between homosexuality and the AIDS crisis. Quinn stated that:

Being a child of the 80s, the AIDS crisis was really a popular subject when I was a kid. And obviously, when you're eight or nine, you sort of understand that there's a disease and its affecting gay people or whatever, but you don't really understand any of the details of that. But it was very obvious, even at that age,

that that was considered a bad thing and that those people were sinners and there was a very negative connotation anytime that subject came up.⁸³

Coming from a very conservative Christian family, Quinn, like many other LGBT people during this time who felt unable to openly discuss their sexual identity, was forced to live inside the toxic closet.⁸⁴ While “coming out” may have offered some solace, many LGBT people within conservative religious traditions risked rejection, abuse, and ostracism from their family or community. While coming out wasn’t an option for Quinn while he was growing up, staying in the toxic closet risked long-term emotional, physical, social, and spiritual consequences. Although Quinn is now out to his family and community, doing so was a difficult path he had to travel.

Quinn’s experience mirrors that of many LGBT people and was a direct result of the rampant homophobia espoused by the Religious Right and its spokespeople. When asked whether or not Graham’s question: “Is AIDS a judgment from God?”⁸⁵ had an impact on his specific religious community, Quinn responded that he had “been thinking about [Graham’s question] a lot...because it was something you heard a lot about as a kid and into the early 90s everyone seemed to be talking about [AIDS].”⁸⁶ Quinn internalized the stigma and fear instilled by his own religious leaders and, like many other LGBT individuals, this led him to remain in the toxic closet. In the long-term, this led to problems with how he eventually encountered and engaged with his own sexuality, religious community, personal faith, family, and sexual education.

The toxic closet has a far-reaching impact not only on religious communities but also on public institutions that are influenced by religious norms. Growing up in North

⁸³ Quinn Karges in discussion with the author, August 2015.

⁸⁴ Barton, *The Toxic Closet*.

⁸⁵ Petro, *After the Wrath of God*.

⁸⁶ Karges, August 2015.

Dakota in the 80s and 90s, sex education in the public school system was far from ideal. While sex education in schools has always been a taboo subject, in North Dakota's public schools, it was generally limited to abstinence only education or discussions of heterosexual norms. While the state has made progress – it now teaches about STIs including about HIV/AIDS, as well as varying forms of contraception that people can use to protect themselves – during Quinn's adolescence, this was not the case.⁸⁷ However, it should not be solely within the purview of sex ed classes in public schools that individuals encounter information about safe sex practices. In Quinn's case, as for many others, his religious community and the education he received there was just as important and vital to his identity. Unfortunately, growing up inside a conservative evangelical household meant that progressive education around issues as such sex before marriage, non-heterosexual acts, or contraception, simply did not occur.

The early negative discourse around HIV/AIDS promulgated by Christian leaders used sexual condemnation and shame to deploy their message to the masses.⁸⁸ As Jordan points out: "many of the rhetorical devices now deployed in religious polemic against homosexuality were also applied to masturbation, nocturnal emissions, and a host of other sexual activities."⁸⁹ This rhetoric had a damning impact on many individuals who didn't have the community support to help them overcome hateful rhetoric or the ability to escape religious communities that asserted that gay and lesbian individuals deserved the horrible things that were happening to them. Due to the

⁸⁷ ND Department of Health Resources, North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, <https://www.nd.gov/dpi/SchoolStaff/SafeHealthy/HealthEducation/NDDepartmentofHealthResources/>, April 16, 2019.

⁸⁸ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 26.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

failings of both the religious and social institutions in Quinn's life, the shame and stigma that the toxic closet imposed on his social and physical wellbeing caused him to fulfill what he called a "self-fulfilling prophecy:"

Growing up in a small town in North Dakota, I didn't really think about [HIV/AIDS] that much [because you didn't hear about it for a really long time after the early 90s]. My sex education, I think, failed me. [HIV/AIDS] did scare me and I think it definitely played a role in my discomfort with coming out. I more or less thought that I would probably end up with HIV. It was just something that I obviously didn't want to happen but felt like it was probably going to be inevitable even with condoms, for some reason. This is why I saw that my sex education failed me, I got the message that safe sex wasn't good enough, that you were still going to get it, even if you practiced safe sex. So that actually led me to make some pretty bad choices in terms of that. The irony of it all is I am HIV positive. So, I guess in a way, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. I find it interesting and I've had some discussion about that, because I more or less believed that I would be and now it's happened. So what kind of message is your community sending when they put those beliefs on you, that 'if you're gay then you will get HIV'? Well, that's what I believed and look what happened.

I think that was a thought at one point. As I got older, I didn't really believe that personally, but it definitely was something that I think flavored my thought process about especially coming out. I remember hearing that as a kid, '[AIDS] is God's punishment for the gay community.'⁹⁰

Quinn's sexual education was shaped by religious assumptions about sexuality, which is evidence of the power religious traditions have over communities and government-funded educational systems.

Ultimately, Quinn left his religious community and searched for a new one. What he found, like many other LGBT people who felt condemned by the conservative religious communities they grew up in, was not a new religion but rather a new and accepting community. As Quinn stated: "I definitely think that the LGBT community has contributed things [or] offered things that are replacing some of those other community aspects that others in faith-based communities can no longer have, or choose not to

⁹⁰ Karges, August 2015.

have.”⁹¹ Quinn’s story points to a larger trend of LGBT people leaving their religious communities in search of new ones as a result of religious judgments against anything that fell outside the purview of heteronormativity.

LGBT individuals often stayed in their religious communities because it brought order to their lives while they were trying to understand their sexual identities. For one of my interviewees, Mikel Gerle, a 53-year-old gay man living in West Hollywood, religion “brought order to chaos.”⁹² Mikel was born in North Platte, Nebraska to very young parents. He moved around a lot when he was young and during one move, he and his family stopped in Salt Lake City and, after visiting the Mormon Temple, converted to Mormonism. Knowing he was attracted to men at a young age, Mikel found that Mormonism, with its structure and rituals, brought order to the chaos that he was experiencing in terms of both his family dynamics and his own sexual identity. When asked how he would best describe his sexual orientation, Mikel replied that he is “very gay,” specifically, stating that:

I’ve always known I was gay; it was never a secret to me. I still find it baffling when people say, “I came out in college” ... I guess there’s a range of sexuality, but for me I just couldn’t even really fake it that I was attracted to girls or anything.⁹³

Mormonism offered stability to Mikel and his family during turbulent times when his parent’s marriage was in disarray and his own understanding of his sexual identity was forming. While religion offers ideas of eternal salvation to some, it offers structure and community to others and that is exactly what happened to Mikel and his family. As he puts it, they were “rudderless” and then the church came along and offered a plan for

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Mikel Gerle in discussion with the author, September 2015.

⁹³ Ibid.

their entire lives as well as structure about how to live their lives from sunup to sundown, making it easy to create order out of chaos.⁹⁴ His family, like so many others, found religion not because they were necessarily looking to find God but because they were looking to find a home.

In searching for a community, Mikel found a religious tradition that brought his family both comfort and heartache. Mikel stated that in Mormonism you: “get married, have kids, raise them to be Mormon, follow all these rules, and [realize] it is the right way to live.”⁹⁵ However, Mikel also understood that his sexuality was completely out of line with Mormon teachings. Mikel stated that he, “could look up homosexuality and it would show [him] all the references in all of scripture” that defined him as an abomination, that Satan had control of him, and that all of his instincts were evil.⁹⁶ The religious tradition that he loved shunned him because of the sexual awakening he was going through. Like many young individuals starting to have sex, Mikel would soon replace what Mormonism gave him emotionally and spiritually with sex. Sex was an important piece of Mikel’s liberation from his conservative upbringing and it proved to be his saving grace when he was told what he was doing was sinful:

I went to dance camp at Brigham Young University of all places and I shared my room with Bart. Bart was a year younger than me and we ended up having sex for the first time like in a year since I’d had sex. I just felt this relief. I just felt this joy. It’s like, “This is so right.” It just lifted all of that death, unworthiness and all of that stuff and I was just like, “I don’t know what’s right anymore but I’m a good person, so I’m going to trust the part of the faith that says God is all-knowing and if God is all-knowing, then God knows who I am as a person and who I am as a person is an amazing person, I’m good for the planet.

So, in my own head I cut myself from the Church, I don’t believe anymore I’ll just go through the motions, by this time I knew all the motions and that was easy but

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

that meant being out with Bart and sometimes even drinking and having sex. We had like a 10 o'clock curfew, even in high school I had to be home by 10 o'clock. So I'd come home at 10 and I'd sneak out my bedroom window and then I'd roll my truck down the hill so it wouldn't make any noise and then start it when it got down to the bottom and then Bart and I would go park somewhere and have sex or do whatever. Then I would come back in and it would be like 2:00 in the morning and I'd crawl in the window and by 4:30 or 5:00 whenever my Dad would knock on the door and it was time to get ready for Missionary prep.⁹⁷

While Mikel would still have to go through the motions of being engaged with his religious community and training, his sexual dalliances helped him to remain in touch with his gay identity.

While his encounters with other men proved to be educational, teaching him about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and what he later came to know as HIV/AIDS, sex became the religion that Mikel looked to for freedom. It was in the community of gay men that Mikel learned who he was and what was most important to him, especially in a time where his family, as a result of their Mormon faith, was unaccepting of his sexuality. Furthermore, during our interview, I asked:

John: So, sex really freed you in a sense?

Mikel: Sex really freed me because sex also changed my entire perception of who I was. My parents, now that I'm older I see that they were doing the best that they could but my dad was very quiet and my stepmom ran the house and she was a burning ball of fear that we would not be accepted or respected or we couldn't have any control over anything [if people found out I was gay].⁹⁸

The community of men that Mikel found comfort in served as a community of individuals that came together by choice.

By the time Mikel left home and moved to California, he had left his Mormon identity and community behind and found a new one with the men he came to know both personally and sexually. Although Mikel understood early on through his readings

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

and interactions with Mormons and other faith leaders that Christian scripture deemed homosexuality an abomination, living in California during Reagan's presidency, solidified his anti-religious viewpoint. Much like Quinn, Mikel started hearing about and seeing how non-LGBT individuals talked about people living with or dying from HIV/AIDS, both in everyday society as well as on TV and other mediums. It was 1982 when Mikel started realizing that many people, when talking about AIDS, would state that it was: "what gay people get and deserve."⁹⁹ Most importantly, while Mikel was able to get over the hatred and anger that he felt as a result of growing up in the Mormon Church through finding a community of gay men in both his hometown and in California, he realized that it wasn't that he needed treatment to get over his homosexuality, but rather that society needed to get over it:

John: The church too, would you agree?

Mikel: Including the church as part of society, yes. I believe religion is responsible for a lot of pain and suffering ... [HIV/AIDS took a lot of people from the community]. I saw [what was] happening but I still had my Idaho, no-sex education background and I still went to the bath house and I still had a lot of unprotected sex so by 1987 when I was tested, I was positive, HIV positive, and thought I'd be dead before I was 24. Then that's my whole, any last vestiges of religion, were over because whatever happens after you die, I am going to know in less than two years. The Church is telling me you deserved what happened to you and everything on TV was reinforcing that from the non-Mormon people.¹⁰⁰

While Mikel never went back to the Mormon community, he did find a sense of belonging in the gay community during the height of the AIDS epidemic that took him from shame and stigma to acceptance and love. The AIDS epidemic taught Mikel and many of his friends that the LGBT community could come together in remarkable ways that people, coming from different backgrounds, faiths, and ways of life, didn't know were possible. As Mikel expressed, sex was the way that gay men, who both lived

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

through or during the HIV/AIDS epidemic were able to “release all the shame; [being] sexually active empowered men [taught gay men] that love, that connection, is what is part of eliminating stigma.”¹⁰¹

“We would be a completely different planet without AIDS, especially the queer community”

In Mark Jordan’s *Recruiting Young Love*, the most poignant part of his contribution to the study of LGBT individuals in conservative religious traditions, which really sets him apart from other scholars, is his exploration of those who suffered and died from HIV/AIDS in silence while staying in conservative religious traditions. The direct action of HIV/AIDS coming into the space of the church brought traditional religious and social rituals that were often denied to homosexuals to the forefront.

Jordan argues that:

AIDS moved gay speech into religious forms: unaccustomed eulogies, spontaneous prayers, bedside vows, blessing and valedictions. The suffering refused to let religion remain the possession of those institutions that manage God for the sake of established powers. [AIDS is] the essence of church reform.¹⁰²

With more individuals, particularly gay men, unable to hide their lesions and thinning bodies from the eyes of their church congregations, HIV/AIDS transformed the way conservative religious traditions either acknowledged or glossed over a global health crisis. From interpreting AIDS as a judgment cast down by God, as Jerry Falwell stated, to churches incorporating HIV/AIDS advocacy into their mission and advocacy work, Jordan’s representation of HIV/AIDS in the spaces of conservative religious traditions finally gives voice to those who died from the disease.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 190.

Throughout my interview with Mikel, I came to realize the power that HIV/AIDS played, not only in his life, but in shaping his understanding of the queer community and its historical significance and contribution to the world:

Mikel: We would be a completely different planet without AIDS, especially the queer community. I love watching a lot of science fiction and there's one show called 'Sliders,' where certain things happened or didn't happen and I would just be like 'If AIDS had never gotten into the population, where would the queer community be right now?' You know? I don't know if we would be as far advanced with our civil rights.

John: [Is that] because it brought such a highlight onto [the gay community], a group of individuals, that were dying or not dying, but basically allowing gay identity to be thrust into the limelight?

Mikel: Right into people's faces. A lot of people didn't stay here and die. A lot of people went back to their parents' house, so a lot of people went back to Kansas City, Missouri or Pocatello, Idaho or Cheyenne, Wyoming. Then all of a sudden a lot of people realized, 'Oh my God, Johnny Swenson down the street was a gay guy.'

John: More thrust into the coming out process, not by their own willingness, but because of a disease.

Mikel: Yeah, and we paid a super high price for that, but it happened. Then we found out what we were capable of. We were capable of starting AIDS Project Los Angeles, the Jeffrey Goodman Clinic at the Gay and Lesbian Center; just so many things came out of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.¹⁰³

Mikel found power in his disease and what it did for the world. Similarly to Jordan's argument that HIV/AIDS brought access to traditional religions and social structures that were previously denied to LGBT individuals, AIDS brought the suffering and outcast back into the traditions that they were cast out of or had left. While the organizations that would be formed as a direct response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic slowly grew to form a community and gain the power and importance that they have today, the structure they offered and the early significance they played in the LGBT community saved lives figuratively and symbolically.

¹⁰³ Gerle, 2015.

Mikel was not alone in seeing the significance the HIV/AIDS epidemic brought to the LGBT community, as well as the religious community as a whole. While many of the early words about HIV/AIDS from religious leaders cast a long shadow on the relationships between gay and lesbian people and religious leaders, the crisis itself helped create the LGBT community that we know today. Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay man to be elected bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire in 2003, signifies this. While Bishop Robinson knew the importance of including faith in the lives of LGBT individuals, he also saw the pain and suffering it caused many while their brothers and sisters were dying. In addition to speaking about HIV/AIDS in his church, Robinson took it one step further, agreeing with Mikel's sentiment that: "the AIDS crisis actually created the LGBT community."¹⁰⁴ Robinson adhered to what Jordan classifies as a "third group" in the ways Christians responded to gay men impacted by HIV/AIDS. Jordan stated: "for a third group, the truly Christian response is to reach out to infected gay men as innocent victims in need of solace and embrace."¹⁰⁵ While the Religious Right is most often associated with the insistence that gay men are not "innocent victims," many leaders like Robinson found it necessary to reach out for the sake of both the spiritual and physical survival of the LGBT community.¹⁰⁶ As Robinson would discover later in life, gay men who survived the HIV/AIDS epidemic sought a new spiritual home, and he attempted to create this community in his religious practice and his home in New Hampshire.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Bishop Gene Robinson in discussion with the author, September 2015

¹⁰⁵ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 176.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁰⁷ Robinson, September 2015.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is not a thing of the past and is very much still a talking point in the culture wars of today. Throughout his book, *After the Wrath of God*, Anthony Petro explores how recent history has had a lasting impact on the way we perceive both the LGBT community and the HIV/AIDS epidemic that thrust it into the limelight. In an interview about his work, Petro states that:

We are in many ways, still living the major political, economic, and cultural changes that erupted then – the culture wars, the decline of the welfare state, and the way that we increasingly think about every aspect of our lives in terms of economization. This was also the decade that introduced most Americans to the intimate lives of gays and lesbians – and this was done very much through news coverage of the AIDS crisis.¹⁰⁸

When Christians across the social and political divide saw what was happening on both their TV screens and, eventually, at home when gay individuals, as Mikel described, came home – unable to hide the lesions and other scars AIDS inflicted – they viewed it as an “apocalyptic event” or a “wake-up call for the church to engage with the world.”¹⁰⁹ Much as Jordan recalls people coming home to die in their family homes, the same ones that had cast them out for being gay, Petro unifies the medical and moral events that AIDS caused throughout the world. The AIDS epidemic sparked a Christian moral crisis, preached about by leaders from Reverend Falwell to Surgeon General Everett Koop, who needed to get a conservative, anti-gay administration to take a public health approach to stopping an out of control epidemic. AIDS caused families from all walks of life to grapple with their loved ones dying of a disease that no one outside of LGBT groups and affirming organizations, both religious and not, wanted to acknowledge. For

¹⁰⁸ “Religion in American History, *After the Wrath of God*; An Interview with Anthony M. Petro,” Samira K. Mehta, Online 6/7/15.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

as many lives as AIDS took, it subsequently awoke a generation of people from all backgrounds to take action and make sure that their loved ones were never forgotten.

“Troy, I love you. I don’t have stepsons and daughters. You’re my son.”

The founding of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in 1968 by Reverend Troy Perry was a political moment in the relationship between people impacted by religious animosity and those still seeking an open and affirming spiritual home. As one of the first Christian churches to openly accept LGBT people, the church’s humble beginnings in Perry’s Huntington Park home spearheaded a spiritual revival that welcomed people in rather than shunning them away. The MCC, along with Perry, would go onto become a leading voice for LGBT equality in religious spaces, welcoming hundreds of thousands of people based on their mission to operate as both a social and spiritual force in people’s lives.

I had the privilege of interviewing Reverend Perry in 2015 at his home in Silverlake, CA. Perry attended Midwest Bible College and Moody Bible Institute and became a preacher at the small Church of God of Prophecy. A veteran of both the US Army and the civil rights movement, Perry is an integral force in affirming religious institutions’ dedication to providing a safe place to the LGBT community as well as in the community at-large. Troy’s life and practice changed the lives of millions of people. He is one of the most prominent figures in LGBT history and his role and significance in combating hatred stemming from scripture is largely unmatched.

Chosen community is vital to the appeal of the MCC and the LGBT community as a whole. As Laurie Ann Cota, one of my interviewees stated, the word family became

coded language that gay people used to discover if they were among their LGBT peers. Acceptance was something Cota saw lacking in the familial relationships of many of her friends, so they had to search out and find peers and communities of their choosing:

I mean for how many years [was family] the code word. Are you family? Because a lot of people create families out of their biological family because the reason is their biological family doesn't accept them because of religion, because of whatever reason, I know a few people that have had that happen to them and have had to create other means of acceptance.¹¹⁰

People from all walks of life left the religious communities they were born into in search of one that would draw on spiritual salvation while at the same time standing up for the rights of minorities, who at the time of its founding were experiencing immense social, political, and religious criticism and hostility.

From an early age, Perry's love for religion was apparent. However, while he loved going to church, he immediately felt like an outcast because he was gay:

I loved both of the churches. I was one of those kids who loved church. For a while I even attended Sabbath school with my Seventh-Day Adventist neighbor who was, they were great friends. So I grew up very ecumenical in that way, but the Pentecostals really won over me. They taught me to sing, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," until I went through puberty. Then they told me, "No, he doesn't." But I really wrestled, I knew that I was gay; I started having sex with a neighborhood boy my age when I was nine years old. So very quickly I knew sexually what I liked.

As I grew old and as I started through puberty, then I was told oh you know, I went to my pastor and talked to him. At age, you know, 18, told him about my feelings. Oh my god, I know what you're trying to do. All you need to do is marry a good woman and that'll take care of that, so I married his daughter, and it wasn't funny five years later with two kids when we broke up. But I kept wrestling with that, and they told me, "We'll just keep praying," and for me, you know, it didn't work. But the Pentecostals, I love their exuberance, I love their faith, the way they did it. I love the Baptists with their love of scripture.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Laurie Ann Cota in discussion with the author, October 2015.

¹¹¹ Reverend Troy Perry in discussion with the author, August 2015

The oldest of five boys, Perry's father was killed when he was twelve years old. His mother made it apparent that he would have to help with his brothers and step into a paternal role sooner rather than he was ready to do so. The traditional life that his family, as well as his spiritual community, perpetuated formulated a way of life that allowed Troy to put aside his sexual identity for the time being because he was too busy being father, brother, son, and caregiver for his family.

Perry's life is fraught with expulsions from religious communities that he tried to fit into by upholding the image of his heterosexual life. Just before he turned nineteen, Perry married a pastor's daughter, attended Bible College, and was outed by a former male lover while ministering in a Pentecostal church.¹¹² While he reconciled with his wife after he was outed, they continuously packed up and moved to new cities after incidents occurred. However, instead of confronting his sexuality, Perry continued to struggle, trying to find home in both the various religious communities and in his literal home with his wife and new son. The act his mentors believed would save him from his feelings for men was prayer and Perry desperately wanted this to work:

I tried to work it through with my wife. They kept saying, "Oh you just need to pray about this." Well with the Church of God, they found out I was gay through someone, and they just threw me out. The Church of God of Prophecy I went to my district overseer, and here I am married still, and she and I are trying to work it out. When I went to him, by now I have read the book, *The Homosexual in America*, by Donald Webster Cory. He just painted me with a paintbrush [in his book] and it let me know there were millions of people just like me, which was an eye-opener to me. I thought where do you meet these millions of people?

The pastor there knew that I'd been thrown out of the church, but didn't know why, I don't think, but I was very honest. But he insisted that I preach. He was going back for the general assembly of the denomination. They knew, I mean I didn't view myself as being charismatic, but they did. There was something special about Troy Perry that he had an incredible way with people, and he had

¹¹² Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 116.

something to say when he got in the pulpit. I prayed, you know what I mean, but I kept saying, "I know, God, you're not hearing this prayer. They've told me I'm a homosexual. I know they've told me and I read what the bible says, it's a sin."¹¹³

According to Mark Jordan, Perry's life is a "coming-out story, with predictable stages."¹¹⁴

From fear to stories of increasing troubles in his career and marriage, Jordan signifies Perry's impact on religiosity in the LGBT community as a new way of how individuals, cast out of their religious faiths, transcended hate in search of true identity. Perry's continued prayer and longing for acceptance, and ultimately his abandonment of the life he was told he should want in search of the one he longed for, helped frame his theological understanding of his own sexuality and ultimately the church he founded.¹¹⁵

After Perry officially came out to himself, his family, and his community, he struggled to find a home or chosen family that fulfilled him the way his old life once did. Experiencing the full range of what the LGBT community had to offer, Perry soon found himself in love with another man. Finally able to be honest with himself about the life he wanted, coming out set Perry up for a rebirth, but first he found himself tested by heartbreak. It was here that Perry hit rock bottom:

Troy: I describe it as six of the best worst months of my life. When [my boyfriend] walked out of my life, I said, "You know, God, this isn't fair." I said, "You don't love me, the churches told me. My parents don't understand." I said, my gay friends tell me, oh, there's 1,000 fish in the sea, but I'm in love with one, and he's just walked out of my life.

I went in the bathroom, took a razorblade, cut both of my wrists, and just hoped I would die. Willy Smith and the boyfriend came home, heard water running in the tub, and Willy knew I was depressed. This is the most depressed; I mean this was the low point of my life as far as I'm concerned. Because I'd never done anything like this. He started calling me, when I didn't answer, they broke down the door, put tourniquets on my arms, rushed me to County General Hospital.

¹¹³ Perry, 2015.

¹¹⁴ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 117.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

I've always said to MCC'ers, sometimes you've got to really hit bottom to know which way is up.

They got tourniquets on my arms, rushed me to the hospital, and I'm crying uncontrollably. When I'm in the hospital and crying uncontrollably, a woman walked in the room. She pushed every religious button on me without realizing it. She knew nothing about my background. Again, I broke down crying. For now, I'm saying "God, I know you're not going to hear this prayer."

John: You prayed.

Troy: I prayed. I said, "I know you want me here, but you can't love me. The church is so hard." I said, "But I have committed this sin. Not the sin of homosexuality, but I had turned my partner into you, God. I said that's what I'm asking forgiveness for. I'm still a practicing homosexual, that hasn't changed. I have done stuff in my life that is unbelievable, but it all started with this little testimony. John, when I'm doing that in bed, thinking about that, all at once, I went back to thinking about what had happened the night before, and replaying some of it.

When it got to the part in the hospital, I remember praying. All at once I felt the joy in my salvation again. Then it dawned on me, and I said, "Whoa, God." I said, "This cannot be you." The church has told me you hate me. I'm still a practicing homosexual. I don't care what this good feeling I'm having [is]; it can't be you. Forty-eight years later in October it'll be 48 years next month. God spoke to me in that still small voice in the mind's ear. Said to me, "Troy, I love you. I don't have stepsons and daughters. You're my son." With that, I knew without a shadow of a doubt. I didn't understand it, but I knew that I was a Christian. That I was a Christian; that was number one.¹¹⁶

The experience of conversing with the divine empowered Perry to create a theology of understanding that, as Jordan describes, allows an individual to "overcome inward resistance to the truth that [one] has been denying."¹¹⁷ Specifically, coming out is an act of conversion and rebirth. Through combining Christian narratives of personal salvation, Perry's rhetoric takes the sexual shame out of coming out, transforming it towards a theological understanding of going out and ministering to homosexuals as one of them and not as an outsider.

¹¹⁶ Perry, 2015.

¹¹⁷ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 118.

Perry relied on a popular gay magazine, *The Advocate*, to put out an ad promoting the first meeting of his new church. Perry looked to God to help him find a way forward to create the church that he was called to start. However, while Perry believe God was integral to the early success of MCC, it was then the chosen community that he formed and the word of mouth that came after the first service that lead more people to Perry and his open and affirming theology that welcomed everyone:

I said, “Lord, if you want to see a church started as an outreach into the GLBT community, but open to everybody, not a gay church, Lord.” I wanted heterosexuals there. I know we’re called a gay church, and I don’t care what they call us, actually. But we’ve always had heterosexuals in our group. That first Sunday – October the 6th, 1968 – I first had to talk “The Advocate” into an ad. I went to visit them, and they said, “Why should we give it? Well, after 45 minutes, I said, “Look, we’ll give you the first ad if you’ll pay for two more.” I said, “If you’ll let me hold the first service, then I’ll pay you for that one, the next one in time, and the one after that.” I did that, so I even had to fight to do a gay ad.

On October 6th, 1968 after that little ad was out there, 12 people showed up. I always say three strangers and nine friends, one heterosexual couple, one Jew, one person of color. The next week we had, that was we had the 12 people plus me there that Sunday. The next Sunday we had 14, I said, “We’re growing.” Next Sunday we had 18, I said, “Hallelujah to the lamb.” Sunday after that, we had nine, I almost died.

In my heart of hearts, I felt like the Lord was saying, “Troy, quit counting the crowd. Don’t worry; it’s going to be just fine. Just preach what I’ve told you to preach.” I’m still wrestling through those scriptures. I cannot say I founded MCC with my head together on everything, but when I prayed, the Lord let me know not in that still small voice, but in my heart of hearts, like when Christians talk, re-read my word. That was the first message I got, just very simply re-read. That was the third time I always view it. The second time was now when I said, “If you want to see a church started, just let me know when,” and that’s the small voice now.

The next week of course, we went up to 20, and we started growing. We moved out of my home very quickly, because the crowd was getting bigger, to the women’s club in Huntington Park. “The Advocate” called and said, “We’ve gotten this article, and we want to run it. But can we add a sentence; you’re gay, right? You’ve told everybody.” I said, “Yes, sir.” Can we put in you’re gay? I said,

“Yes.” So, they just put in a question that he hadn’t put in, in his questions, he interviewed me. My god, with that, the dam broke.

My lord, we had to move out of the small auditorium into the upper room, we called it, which was the bigger auditorium with a stage and all. But through it all, I kept telling people, “Don’t miss church next Sunday. We’re liable to move and you won’t know where we’re at.”

The crowds just kept getting bigger. At [the] first service, one of my best friends said to me, “My god, you preach like there were 1,000 people in church this morning.” I said there would be. Within a year and a half, we bought our first piece of property, and we were having 1,000 people in church.¹¹⁸

The success of the MCC was in part due to Perry’s vision for not only his congregation in Los Angeles but for spreading the gospel to reach the LGBT community wherever they might be. While scholars often incorrectly classify MCC as a gay church, Perry, as Jordan states, was always sure to correct them and make sure they knew it was a “Christian church.”¹¹⁹ This was part of the larger mission that Perry found himself on: if he classified his church as a gay one, the message of acceptance he preached wouldn’t get out to the masses and reach individuals, many like himself, who were excluded from their own religious communities because of their sexual identity. As Jordan described:

Having suffered such bitter exclusion from churches [Perry] was not about to establish a new church on the basis of a reversed exclusion. Given his background, [Perry] could never conceive church as anything other than intrinsically expansive. If Perry imagined a movement that would reach homosexuals everywhere, he equally insisted that it could not be confined to the homosexual ghettos. Spreading everywhere, it would spread even into other churches. The gay ministry must become a general church reform – and not only on issues of sexuality. The reform would take place in Christian churches everywhere – not in a utopian community on some imagined frontier.¹²⁰

Perry’s faith that God loved all his children, that he didn’t have “stepsons or stepdaughters” led him to create a spiritual place that also served as a symbol to those

¹¹⁸ Perry, 2015.

¹¹⁹ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 119.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

who felt excluded like he once did. The inaugural service served as the most powerful and yet empowering act that Perry would do. Everyone who came to his first service, as Jordan described “sympathized with what it was to be denied communion, to be debarred from community, for being a homosexual.”¹²¹ The growing masses of people attending Perry’s services were finally allowed to know that God loved them and that through the wilderness, they would find a community of their choosing and a leader who would point them towards salvation. Perry’s church would be different from those that many of his new followers had left in response to the homophobia they preached:

I knew from me that God loved me, that was the revelation that God then had to love other gay people.¹²²

Perry created a community where none existed. During the AIDS epidemic, he fought for his brothers and sisters who were dying while most others paid no attention. Perry is, by all standards, the reason many people were saved from life in the streets, from homes that they felt unwelcome in, and more importantly, from pews where leaders preached hate. Much like the Biblical Job, Perry found purpose when all over avenues appeared to be closed off. One of his most important qualities, which we can see through the previous pages, is his ability to love and his uttermost faith that God is always watching and listening.

The MCC community, the one Perry created, formed a chosen family for many individuals who had nowhere else to turn. While other churches have become open and affirming to LGBT individuals, not all institutions have based their practice and theology around openness and acceptance of gay people. As Tory Topjian, one of my interviewees who is now an openly gay MCC minister in Milwaukee, WI stated:

¹²¹ Ibid., 119.

¹²² Perry, 2015.

Community brought a closer sense of family versus religion. I think as I became more involved in ministry and in a religious aspect, it solidified. I think whatever congregation I was in, there was that draw of you become a family of community. Even when I was in the Presbyterian Church, it was that you had your own family, and then you have your [LGBT] family, and then the church family and that support.¹²³

The MCC community became a family of choice for many LGBT people, Topjian included. It is because of this community that many individuals were able to find a spiritual and physical home that welcomed them. MCC churches provided much more than just a spiritual home for LGBT people: it also offered a physical meeting space wherein they could come together. As Reverend Nancy Wilson, one of my interviewees stated: “MCC churches provided meeting space and community structure in a way that the black church provided social structure for African-Americans.”¹²⁴ In line with Perry’s intention for the MCC to be more than just a spiritual home, it also nurtured their activist well-being during times of crisis. As Wilson contends:

MCC wasn’t separate from that early gay rights movement. Part of the gay rights movement didn’t like religion, was skeptical and was hostile. We had lots of hostility about lots of things. When I came out of Boston, there weren’t [any spaces people could go]. Eventually, there was a bar owned by a lesbian but that was the only place gay people could go to a bar or even to meet in a social space. We were just starting to create new social space.¹²⁵

While the LGBT movement and community that we know today was just starting to form, the early stages and importance of places like MCC are critical to understanding the cultural shift that was occurring as more people came back to chosen and safe communities. These communities, like MCC, were places created by individuals who left or were cast out of the religious communities they were born into. Initially, Perry had

¹²³ Tory Topjian in conversation with the author, July 2015.

¹²⁴ Reverend Nancy Wilson in conversation with the author, July 2015.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

no idea that the community he created in his living room would become a leading voice in the fight for LGBT equality, nor that the sense of home he cultivated would save more individuals than he will ever know.

CHAPTER THREE

A Different Kind of Community: Finding, Fighting for, and Creating Community

This chapter explores the ways my interviewees found and fought for their chosen communities by charting the various experiences of Bishop Gene Robinson, Reverend Nancy Wilson, Carolyn Weathers, Reverend Albert Stephen Pieters, Jeffrey Hoepfner, Dr. Marie Cartier, and others whose stories we have encountered in the previous chapters. After coming out about their sexuality many of my subjects faced undue scrutiny within their religious communities, resulting in attempts to either find a way to balance the two or to hide their sexuality from their spiritual community. Conservative religious leaders both within their communities and in the public sphere shaped many of the negative experiences they felt when coming out. As a result, many of my interviewees either chose to leave the religious community they were born into in search of more open and accepting ones or they charted and created their own. Throughout this chapter, the theme of community is central to the lives of individuals fleeing persecution and oppression as a result of their sexuality. This chapter contends that as a result of such ostracization, my subjects sought out new communities outside of the religious communities and faiths they were born into as they accepted their own sexuality. Most importantly, this chapter shows that as the LGBT rights movement became more open and public, it offered new forms of community that were accepting and open.

“Sunday Services”: From Oppression to Chosen Community

Bishop Gene Robinson is widely known as the first priest in an openly gay relationship to be sanctified as a bishop in a major Christian denomination. As a result of his consecration, many conservative Episcopalians in the United States left the Episcopal Church and formed the Anglican Church of North America. An activist at heart, the now-retired Robinson agreed to be interviewed for this dissertation after I met him while he was advocating for California's Death with Dignity bill in 2015.

Born in Lexington, Kentucky, he spent most of adult life in New Hampshire. Growing up in the 1950s, his household was extremely religious and conservative, and homosexuality was rarely referred to. Church was a huge part of his life growing up, making up most of his family's social life and influencing his decision to study religion rather than becoming a pediatrician. However, it wasn't just the church itself but the community it represented that attracted him to the profession:

Literally, I can go back there today and there are old women in that Church who remember the first day my mother brought me to church as an infant. I had a recent experience of going back to that old church and they were talking about the birthmark on the back of my neck that they remembered. This is something that nobody knows about me, right? These old women were there 68 years ago when I was first brought to church. That is just a microcosm of what community can mean in a small, rural place in church. It was really quite extraordinary.

My parents, for instance, if someone was in the hospital, there was just no question that they were going to visit them. If somebody died, there was no question that you would bake a dish and take it to the family. It was a very, very huge part of my upbringing.¹²⁶

Bishop Robinson feared coming out to his religious family members, a fear many LGBT people have to grapple with. As he states:

I didn't come out to my parents until I drove home to Kentucky to tell them that I was getting divorced and the reason is that I'm gay.... If it had been just up to my father, he wouldn't have allowed me to stay there that night, but my mother was

¹²⁶ Bishop Gene Robinson in conversation with the author, September 2015.

there. As usual, she was a mitigating factor. It was a very difficult thing for them. They were terrified that their friends would find out because I think [my parents] thought it was a reflection on them, something they had done or not done and that it reflected badly on them.¹²⁷

The role community, specifically religious community, played in Bishop Robinson's early life became the foundation for much of his work in the Episcopal Church. By the time he went to college, he had left the religious community of his birth and was introduced to the Episcopal Church, finding it very open-minded and non-judgmental. Simply put: Bishop Robinson found a "spiritual home" in the Episcopal Church that replaced the home he found on Sundays growing up.¹²⁸

Community plays a significant role in many of the experiences my interviewees recollected. Specifically, religious community was the basis for much of the stress they experienced, as they found it difficult to either balance or hide their sexuality from their spiritual communities. Additionally, while religious community represented a point of difficulty for many of my interviewees, counter-cultural movements, such as the anti-war movement, feminism, and gay liberation helped give them the solace they wished for during Sunday service, but instead received at protests, community meetings, or within new congregations that were formed to create safe and empowering spaces for LGBT individuals.

Much like Bishop Robinson and many others, in 2005 a blogger named Zach, then a sixteen-year-old high school student, came out as gay to his Christian parents. Their response exemplifies the larger issues that this work addresses about the ways in which spirituality and sexuality are not two different spheres but rather two identities that have ebbed and flowed with each other throughout American religious history. Zach's

¹²⁷ Robinson, 2015.

¹²⁸ Robinson, 2015.

parents stated that “something was psychologically wrong with [him], that they ‘raised [him] wrong and that [he isn’t] on the path God wants him to be on.”¹²⁹ Their response is one that religious communities, as well as counter-cultural groups, have tried to navigate through in order to empower LGBT individuals rather than further ostracize them.

Religious community also played a significant role in the life of Reverend Nancy Wilson. In 1976, Reverend Wilson became the youngest person ever elected to ministry in the Metropolitan Community Church. Much like Bishop Robinson, she was very involved with her spiritual community from a young age and found community during a critical time in her life:

I think I was fascinated with my church. In fact, I describe, I had an experience when I was 11 or 12, just before puberty, which I’m sure was all connected to sexuality. I really believe that issues around sexuality and spirituality are very deeply interconnected...in many ways. As I did not have words for coming out, or even for dealing with gender issues, I identify as female, but I knew that I was female nonconforming very early on. I had an experience where I would say, it was a very personal, private space, where I experienced, and there was something in my universe that was my friend, capital “F” Friend, at 11 or 12 years old. I think it happened at a time when I was experiencing depression. You can psychologize it or whatever else it was, but for me it was - I connected it to church and to God. Then I began to express, I was very interested in our preacher preaching and I had an interest in ministry, which was not welcome news in my family. It was okay to be religious or spiritual, but not too much.¹³⁰

The religious space, for Reverend Wilson, was in fact a place where she did not feel comfortable coming out or expressing her authentic self. More specifically, she began to find the acceptance she needed and craved in the early days of the Civil Rights movement, which to her, blended religious expression and experience, as many of the movement’s leaders were ordained or religiously-oriented.

¹²⁹ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, ix.

¹³⁰ Reverend Nancy Wilson in conversation with the author, July 2015.

The leaders were clergy, so I saw this Civil Rights, I very much identified with that. Then the anti-war movement, even the United Methodist Church I was connected to had a very strong social justice component in those days. Very different today, but in those days Civil Rights and the anti-war movement were huge social justice, religious issues too. I really, hook, line and sinker, I was really, that was where my religious passion was connected.¹³¹

While Reverend Wilson's parents were not conservative or fanatical about religion, Sunday services were part of their weekly schedule and this helped shape her views about community. She stated: "My parents participated in other activities of the church, it was a social place for them too. I grew up aware that they believed in all of this stuff, they went to church, they valued it."¹³² Religion was a vital voice that aided Reverend Wilson during critical developmental times throughout her life and, though she disconnected from the religion of her upbringing, she never became disillusioned about the power that community offered to people. This was one of the key factors that sparked her involvement in Civil Rights, the anti-war movement, and ultimately women's and LGBT equality and empowerment.

A major theme that I discovered during my interviews was the power that community and movement-building offered individuals seeking refuge outside of their religious traditions. For example, Reverend Wilson's involvement in the anti-war movement started on college campuses and continued from the late-1960s through the 1970s:

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

Even at Allegheny, the anti-war movement was there. I went to Washington D.C. for protests, our Religion Department was going, four religion majors in my class, all of us would get in a Volkswagen bus. We would go to Washington D.C., we would march, we were doing all of those things. We shut down our school during the moratorium; I was a part of that. It defined my experience in college. It dominated everything there. You still did your classes and everything, but it was the, it defined the times. I think the thing I learned there was that young adults could change things. You could make a difference. I do think we had an impact on turning the tide around more and shifting social opinion. It was painful and it took a long time, but I do think it was huge. Of course, feminism, everything was happening at the same time.¹³³

For many people during this time, counter-cultural social movements played an important role in offering a different kind of community than those they were familiar with. Whether or not they were raised in a religious tradition, left it as a result of their sexuality, or found their views at odds with it, these social movements replaced the importance of the proverbial Sunday services that many people were accustomed to and gave them something else to find salvation in.

Much like Reverend Wilson's awakening in counter-cultural social movements, Dr. Marie Cartier too found herself at home in the verging women's movement of the 1960s. Raised Catholic, Dr. Cartier's religious faith was critical to her upbringing, yet she found aspects of it problematic as she came to realize both the role of women in the church and that, as a woman, she could never be ordained:

I think the bigger concern for me with the Catholic Church was I was coming out and coming into feminism at the same time. I had an issue with the church about not being able to be ordained. I remember screaming at this nun to give me confession. She said she couldn't, and I remember pointing to this priest and going: "Why does he have to do it? Why can't you do it? Why aren't you as good as him." That was a real falling out for me with the church.¹³⁴

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Dr. Marie Cartier in conversation with the author, June 2015.

Cartier's falling out with the church over ordination led her to discover counterculture movements such as feminism and the early years of ACT UP.¹³⁵ While Cartier's faith was still a critical aspect of her identity, she found solace and home in her new chosen communities that combined the activism and practice she found empowering. She wanted to bring all the parts of herself that she had discovered into community with one another. While she agrees that religion did indeed help her, it was seeing early forms of feminism within the Catholic church that ultimately led her to become a women's and LGBT-rights activist. From seeing nuns living alone, which for Cartier was noteworthy because very few women lived alone in New Hampshire (where she grew up), to discovering that she was a lesbian in the late 1970s, countercultural communities became her new form of spirituality. Cartier states:

For me, when I came into myself as a lesbian in the late 1970s, by then the new age and spirituality was something in our lexicon, especially in the women's movement. There was a huge language of being a witch, and goddess culture. I remember going to Michigan Women's Music Festival and being in this circle of women in the woods, like 300 women howling at the moon. As I was going to bed I passed this huge Hawaiian woman, she looked at me and she goes, "Strong dreams." That still feels like one of the most spiritual experiences I ever had.¹³⁶

For my interviewees, counterculture social movements replaced the traditional faith-based communities or, alternatively, allowed them to interact with their religious communities in non-traditional ways. Feminism served as a symbol that allowed Cartier to see the Catholic church in a different context. Cartier wanted to be a priest and she saw the nuns as feminists. It was critical for her to create communities that mimicked her activism. New types of women's spirituality allowed Cartier to locate her feminism in

¹³⁵ ACT UP stands for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. It is an international direct-action advocacy group working to help the lives of people with AIDS.

¹³⁶ Cartier, June 2015.

the core principles of her Catholic faith. Cartier follows up the statement regarding her desire for the nun to give her confession by stating:

I was really looking for empowerment. I was looking to be an empowered woman. There wasn't much in the Catholic church like that. That's probably why I was yelling at the nun like that. You give me confession, you know. The agency that women had in women's community, the agency that women had in the lesbian community to not be partnered with men. To be individual; to be autonomous. It just felt like a way out. Feminists helped me to see the structure of the [Catholic] church as something I could interact in. You know, like a set thing. It's something formed by humans. I continued to be Catholic; I continued to be a feminist.¹³⁷

Cartier was able to remain connected to her Catholic roots, but as a result of social movements like feminism and new age spiritual communities, she was able to refocus how faith now interacted with her out and proud self. While Cartier still wants to be ordained, she was no longer the person who needed that ordination to come from Catholicism. Instead, she established herself in the women's spirituality movement, where she was ordained as a priestess in 2015 in the Temple of Isis/Fellowship of Isis.

From Baptist Preacher's Daughter to Lesbian Activist

Multiple interviewees spoke of the impact political events had on them. Because my interviewees varied in age and life experiences, they all felt the impacts of political events differently with one constant: the community they discovered as a result of these experiences was always there for them no matter what. My interviewees differed in age from late seventies to early twenties, meaning they had a wide range of experiences, especially as the political climate changed rapidly from the 1967 Black Cat Riots in Los Angeles to the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in 2015.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Forming community was essential for the survival of LGBT people. As many of my interviewees pointed out, the events outside of their community had a significant impact on how people came to find each other and how they existed in juxtaposition to the current sociopolitical climates they oftentimes found themselves in. For example, Carolyn Weathers – a 75-year-old lesbian born in Eastland, Texas, and raised as a Baptist preacher’s daughter – became a leader in the growing sexual liberation movement, specifically the fight for equal rights. Carolyn oftentimes felt at odds with the religion she was born into and its opinion of her chosen community:

I don’t consider myself a Christian now. I don’t believe in original sin right off the bat, so hey. I was severely depressed in 1965, fifty years ago. It was a clinical depression. Nobody knew anything. I have a book on the Upanishads and the Hindu religion where they say—not the religion, I am not a Hindu. Not any religion, but that text of, “I’ll seek the one, the one path one,” instead of all this Baptist stuff.... Jesus loves you and God hates you.¹³⁸

The last part of Carolyn’s comment is what struck me the most out of our conversation. The fact that you can believe in the redeeming quality of Jesus as savior whilst simultaneously thinking that God hates you, is powerful in regards to how people either reject or attempt to stay in a specific religious tradition. Carolyn didn’t feel like she fit into any specific religious tradition, so she dabbled in various religious communities and practices that she found more appealing. In doing so, she discovered the power that religion has to both reject and accept an individual at the same time. Carolyn was fascinated by the Gordian knot that religion places many people in, who then seek out different, more appealing faiths. From this, they either come to leave the religious community altogether or to create one that offers the same fulfillment that they found in the religion they were raised in.

¹³⁸ Carolyn Weathers in conversation with the author, July 2015.

Carolyn oftentimes found herself in conflict with the religion of her birth and set out to find a community that didn't shy away from answering her questions. A self-described precocious child, at a young age Carolyn asked her mother about the nature of heaven and hell and why some people would go to heaven while others did not: "Even as a child I was questioning why did some people go to heaven and others don't? I asked my mother about that one time, you know, it didn't seem right. I think I was about seven years old."¹³⁹ As Carolyn and her sister – who was also a lesbian – left home, they found themselves going to more gay bars and experiencing the culture and community without fear of rejection. Carolyn and her sister found community in these gay bars. When they were at college with like-minded people who were also fleeing communities and traditions they no longer understood or possibly were rejected from, they were able to discover more about themselves and their sexuality:

Carolyn: I think as soon as both my sister and I got away from home, we never went to church again, except when it was necessary, you know, when mother's visiting. [Once] she came Easter weekend and of course, she expected to go to church [for] Easter, and my sister and I had to look in the Yellow Pages to find one.

John: Did you see religion as an obstacle towards equal rights for gay people? How was religion viewed in these groups?

Carolyn: We didn't care too much; it wasn't much of a concern. The Christians, the Jews, nobody; maybe it's because I had the [gay community], you know.¹⁴⁰

It took Carolyn and her sister time to find a community they felt comfortable in but, as a result, they were able to free themselves from a Baptist community that they were not compatible with. This push towards community increased as they began seeing the outside world become more conservative in juxtaposition to the sexual awakening they

¹³⁹ Weathers, 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

were experiencing both at college and in the gay bars. Carolyn believes that the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 represented the moment many people began to fear impending persecution because of the conservative push for moral righteousness and traditional heterosexual normativity, which they rejected both in spirit and in actuality. The push that Carolyn and many others saw during the 1980s towards the heteronormative nuclear family model of the 1950s set itself at odds with the sexual awakening and fight for unconditional freedom, fairness, and equality that she had committed herself so wholly to.

Reagan's election had a serious impact on the LGBT community both practically and symbolically. The sexual awakening and anti-war movement of the 1960s set a path forward for many individuals who didn't fit into the heteronormative ideal, allowing them to find a community or identity that they did feel comfortable in. However, when Reagan was elected by a significant majority, many felt that it was a reaction against the growing progressive and social movements that were, at least it seemed, becoming more and more part of the societal fabric. Carolyn and the community saw this firsthand and what they experienced was as close to a death as she could recall. The fight for equal rights for LGBT individuals and women, as well as civil rights for African Americans, as Carolyn states: "scared the hell out of the ultraconservatives" and as a result, they elected a man who would herald in a new age for conservatism in America.¹⁴¹ The 1980 election brought with it a growing sense of dread within Carolyn's chosen community. For Carolyn and other gay and lesbian individuals, Reagan's

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

election seemed like an endnote on all the progress they made in the sixties and seventies:

When Reagan was elected, some of us went out in my sister's backyard; it was gay men and women, and we held kind of a spontaneous wake, but we just knew, this is bad. That was the beginning of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell, and I think when the Republican Party, for votes, started hooking up with the Evangelicals, and they with him, so since 1980, they have become this incredible, powerful, wealthy group.¹⁴²

As Carolyn describes it, Reagan's election caused ripple effects that she saw slowly taking hold across her own local community. The Reagan years wrought significant influence on how LGBT people defined themselves and their communities in terms of activism, thereby changing the social, sexual, and political landscape of the United States. The silence of the Reagan administration in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, which was killing more and more gay men each year, caused many people, like Carolyn, to take up metaphorical arms to protect her community. Carolyn saw Jerry Falwell and many others in the Moral Majority as dangerous enemies of the LGBT community due to the way they spoke about people with HIV/AIDS. For Carolyn, coming from a welcoming family within the Baptist tradition and later finding a community in Texas and elsewhere that accepted her, the fact that the country seemed to be slipping so far backwards felt "shocking."¹⁴³ In her opinion, conservative religious leaders' assertion that "AIDS [exists] because we sinned against the Lord" really "pissed [her] off."¹⁴⁴ While Carolyn wasn't alone in this feeling, her initial reaction about the election of President Reagan was right: it did signify a death; specifically the death of

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

many of her beloved brothers and sisters in the community she had fought so hard to find.

“God is Greater than AIDS”

As Susan Sontag points out: “illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust.”¹⁴⁵ As Carolyn and other interviewees pointed out, AIDS was labeled a gay disease and thereby became an easy point of attack for conservative religious leaders and political figures like Reagan. The AIDS crisis galvanized the LGBT community to join together against individuals who equated AIDS with sin. However, while many individuals felt rebuked by their home communities as a result of their sexuality, the AIDS crisis further entrenched that divide once LGBT individuals were not able to hide their diagnoses anymore. The AIDS crisis directly created a community of individuals struggling to survive in a community that equated their identity with sin. As Sontag further points out: “[AIDS] flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, job-mates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity, and among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolated the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution.”¹⁴⁶ The Reagan Administration’s silence in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis compelled people to turn to their chosen communities to fight back and find solace in times of need. Conservative religious leaders propelled the LGBT community to come together,

¹⁴⁵ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 72.

¹⁴⁶ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 113.

stand up, and fight back against both their rhetoric and the deafening silence from the government that resulted in the deaths of many members of the LGBT community.

One of the most powerful interviews I had was with Reverend A. Stephen Pieters, a long-term survivor of AIDS, a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) pastor, and *I Love Lucy* superfan. While Carolyn and many other interviewees I spoke with found community or homes in differing groups, whether religious or not, Reverend Pieters, like Reverend Wilson, found solace and home in the MCC when he accepted the call to become a pastor in Hartford, Connecticut in 1979. Raised in Andover, Massachusetts, Steve attended Phillips Andover, where his father chaired the Mathematics Department, before earning his BA from Northwestern University in 1974, followed by a Master of Divinity from McCormick Theological Seminary.

Much like Carolyn's upbringing, Stephen's involvement in religious communities started very young as his grandfather was a Presbyterian minister in Long Beach and served as a missionary in Korea alongside his grandmother. Stephen's father was a deacon and his mother a Christian education coordinator. In his own words, religion "absolutely" played a significant role while he was growing up.¹⁴⁷ The shame he felt as a result of being unable to come out to his family reared its ugly head when he attempted suicide at 15, but luckily he could not bring himself to follow through.

To cope with the shame and internalized homophobia created by both society-at-large and his own religious upbringing, Stephen turned to alcohol and developed a drinking problem. While discussing his coming out both to the world and more

¹⁴⁷ Reverend Albert Stephen Pieters in conversation with the author, August 2015.

importantly, himself, Pieters shared with me the pain and ultimately the power that being truthful about his sexuality would have for his future successes and relationships:

John: When you were finally able to come out to yourself first, what was that negotiation like?

Stephen: Well, I had been drinking a lot, and my first year out of college I sat in an apartment in Northwestern. I moved around quite a bit, I did a lot of geographical tours while drinking a lot too. It was making me terribly sick. In October of 1975, I went to an AA meeting for the first time, and I got sober. About six months later I realized that if I was going to stay sober, I had to do something about being gay. I read Patricia Nell Warren's *The Front Runner*, which was just out in paperback at that time... That book was what gave me permission to think that I could possibly be an openly gay man. It had huge influence on me. So, I talked to the pastor at Northwestern, the chaplain at Northwestern, Jim Avery, who, he happened to be gay; conveniently enough. He was openly gay and had a little partner; we called them lovers in those days. So he suggested that I check out the gay AA meetings. So I went to a gay AA meeting and I met a fellow named Fred Frank, who was a tall, strapping blonde. He was very funny and masculine looking but very precious and funny. I wanted to go to bed with him, but of course he didn't want to be my teacher. He took me to Dignity, the Catholic mass.¹⁴⁸

Pieters was drawn to the religious community because of his upbringing but didn't feel welcome because of the shame and stigma oftentimes inflicted on LGBT people. As a result of growing up in a religious household, Pieters was drawn back to faith communities because of the solace it offered him. However, Pieters found comfort in other communities as well, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which played significant role in his life, both in helping him get sober and in offering a larger community where he found both a physical and spiritual home.

While Pieters would go on to join Reverend Troy Perry in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), he also found a community to help him both survive and thrive in the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles. The group, "for 40 years [has] been

¹⁴⁸ Pieters, August 2015.

that safe space for hundreds of gay men. It has also been a place of welcome for their allies, friends and families, as well as a champion of social justice for the LGBTQ community.”¹⁴⁹ The chorus represented a space, much like MCC, where Pieters was able to overcome any shame and stigma and fully express himself and take part in community with other gay men (and their supporters). Pieters found homes in various communities, but his true calling came from the community he had previously disconnected himself from. After a friend took him to Dignity, a national organization that advocated for change in the Catholic Church’s teaching on homosexuality and gender identity, Pieters found his salvation in religion and, ultimately, through Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Church:

It was the spring of ’75, and he took me to MCC, and the first person I heard preach there was Troy Perry, and he scared me to death. He told us in his sermon about the New Orleans fire that had killed so many of the MCC members, and the pastor, and the associate pastor. Troy told the story of how they were trapped in this building an arson[ist] set fire to it, and the building burned, and the people all burned to death. I was looking for the exits. I mean I was terrified. I thought, “I can’t risk being with a bunch of gay people.”¹⁵⁰

Perry’s exuberance transfixed Pieters and, as a result, he was able to meet a community of LGBT people who were open about their sexuality and their faith. He was inspired by Perry and the MCC’s message, deciding that he wanted to do the same thing he saw Perry do from the pulpit: he decided to become a preacher. Through his education and by finding a community that was open and accepting of his sexuality, Pieters built up the courage to come out during a rising tide of conservatism and anti-LGBT legislation led by Anita Bryant:

¹⁴⁹ Jessica Gelt, “Why the Gay Men’s Chorus of L.A. is singing for survival,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Pieters, August 2015.

Anita Bryant was on TV, and you know I was shaking my head. I was shaking my head, and I said something like, "I can't stand that woman. She is so awful, and bigoted, and blah, blah, blah." I didn't go on too much, but I let it be known that I didn't like her. That evening after dinner, my mom and dad and I were sitting at the table, and my dad said, "I wish that you would communicate with us more, and write us more, especially now that you're in seminary. I would hope that you would keep us informed. What church is it that you're involved with?" I told them, well; it's an interdenominational church. There are people from many different faith backgrounds that go to this church. Finally, dad said, and I don't remember exactly what prompted this, but dad said, "Steve, do you think you may be a homosexual?" I said, I kept laughing like that, "Yes, I am."¹⁵¹

However, while much of the anxiety Pieters experienced resulted from the hardships of the coming out process, it was his father, who said that he loved him and that, while he didn't understand what being gay meant, he would love him no matter what. Coming out to his family allowed Pieters freedom from the stigma and shame. This, in turn, encouraged him to become an advocate for LGBT people at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, when those who held power and influence chose to look the other way.

In 1982, Pieters resigned his positions in Hartford and moved to Los Angeles after experiencing a series of illnesses. Soon after, he was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and stage four lymphoma and told that he would not live to see 1985. Pieters persisted, not only living to see 1985, but also becoming an icon in both the LGBT and religious communities for his and MCC's stance on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Pieters's activism began as a result of the AIDS crisis and he was able to shape a new narrative of people living with and surviving HIV/AIDS that rejected the one being pushed out from the conservative pulpits:

For me, a lot of [my activism] crystallized in AIDS activism. Because I was active with AIDS, spirituality, and the spiritual concerns task force of AIDS Project Los Angeles, and the religious activity of this and that. Then there was ACT UP, which came along some years after I started in AIDS activism. ACT UP was a

¹⁵¹ Pieters, August 2015.

totally different, radical, active, activist, confrontational group. I was the director of AIDS ministry or the field director of AIDS ministry was my title for the universal fellowship with Metropolitan community churches.

I was over here with my activism as a person with AIDS and as an AIDS activist. ACT UP was over here doing their thing. It was a very different kind of activism. I was deeply involved with the structures that were invited into, you know, the top levels. I went to the White House; I went to a prayer breakfast at the White House to talk with Clinton. You know, we were confronting churches about their lack of AIDS ministry, and the importance of them doing that. We were active in going into the hospitals and forcing the hospitals to pay attention to the people with AIDS with more care, and protecting them, and all of that. While ACT UP over here was knocking down fences and, you know, storming the gates, and being radical, and angry, and all of that, I ran into Larry Kramer several times in the course of my activism, and he knew who I was.¹⁵² You know, which surprised me greatly, but anyway, he knew who I was. He would just shake his head at me and go, "Not angry enough. Just not angry enough." You know, he never raged at me, which is kind of amazing considering who he was.¹⁵³

Pieters found a community that he could call home and a cause that he could fight for to make sure that others didn't have to go through the pain and anguish that he did.

Finding a community that embraced a different kind of activism compared to ACT UP's confrontational style, Pieters saw the power of pushing for AIDS activism in circles where he was most comfortable: religious communities.

While Jerry Falwell and other conservative religious leaders proclaimed that AIDS was not just "God's punishment for homosexuals; but God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals," Pieters coined the phrase that proved to be a powerful retort to conservatives religious leaders.¹⁵⁴ Despite being told he had less than a year to live when diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, he refused to believe that he would become victim of this plague that was taking many of his brothers in the gay community.

¹⁵² Larry Kramer is an American playwright, author, and LGBT rights activist. He co-founded Gay Men's Health Crisis and is a leading voice in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

¹⁵³ Pieters, August 2015.

¹⁵⁴ Mark Morford, "The Sad, Quotable Jerry Falwell / It's bad for to speak ill of the dead. Good thing this man's own vile works speak for themselves," *SF Gate*, May 18, 2017.

Pieters, as a direct result of his faith and his chosen community, coined the phrase:

“God is greater than AIDS” and it proved to be the rallying cry that so many men

needed. Pieters rose up to give those in similar situations hope and a reason to live:

I came out to L.A., and in the fall of 1982, I was sick with something or other, and I went to the doctor, Dr. Joel Weisman, who was one of the first to identify AIDS, that there was something going on in the gay community. After a lot of blood work, and you know, looking at me and testing me with this, that, and the other thing. I came to have an appointment with him, and he said, “Well, Steve, I hate to tell you, but your immune system is severely deficient. I have to say, you’ve got GRID.” You know, in those days, it was thought that everybody died.

But not long after that, like in '83, I got very, very sick, horribly sick with hepatitis, CMV, pneumonia, mononucleosis, herpes, shingles, a variety of fungal infections. I mean I just got as sick as can be. I was here in Los Angeles, but word got out. I wanted word to get out because I was housebound, I wanted people to come visit me, I wanted people from MCC to bring me communion, and nobody would do it. One group of people from MCC, the elders talked about it amongst themselves and decided that I was faking it to get attention. Because nobody in MCC had gotten AIDS, certainly nobody in the clergy, and Steve Pieters was known to be very vanilla. We know that vanilla people don't get AIDS. I mean there were lots, so this was '82. It was only a year since AIDS was first noticed in the gay population.¹⁵⁵

Pieters longed for human touch and connection during his sickest time. However, while he belonged to a progressive and accepting church, even MCC didn't know what to do with the AIDS crisis. While conservative churches and figureheads were busy publicly discussing the crisis and its larger implications as a reflection of American society, LGBT churches didn't know what to do. The AIDS crisis presented a complex problem of morality, identity, and faith. It was both a public health crisis and a spiritual one that Pieters experienced firsthand. While some major religions and communities tried to cover up and hide their congregants who were living and dying from AIDS, as Mark Jordan discusses in *Recruiting Young Love*, MCC's women's community began to take

¹⁵⁵ Pieters, August 2015.

care of their dying brothers, delivering the community and physical and spiritual connection that Pieters and other gay men suffering with AIDS longed for. Pieters states:

It was a group from the women's MCC, spearheaded by the Reverend Lucia Chappelle who brought me my groceries. Lucia came and spent time with me. The other women, three or four other women came and spent time with me. It was the women who took care of me in those desperately ill days in '83...the other thing was there were no treatments. People think oh, so they put you on AZT. No, there were no treatments. They didn't know what to do. A physician told a colleague of mine in MCC that in the church you have more to offer than we do in medicine at this point. The doctor also said to me, "Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to live." She put it just like that. I loved it.¹⁵⁶

More men were testing positive by the day and, as a result, the need for community and a place where individuals living with AIDS could come together increased. To fill this need in himself, Pieters discovered AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), which had been founded in 1982, at the onset of the crisis. APLA became a life raft to many gay men (and a few women) who tested positive for HIV/AIDS, as well as other members of the LGBT community who were fearful and lacked the information they needed to better understand how to stay safe and get tested. Pieters was among the first 100 clients at APLA. They helped him and, knowing that he was a minister, put him to work as a volunteer, thinking that it would help him not only survive but also thrive. The leaders at APLA tasked Pieters with calling all the people with AIDS on their client list – from A to Z – every week. While the task was daunting, Pieters provided the community and lifeblood to individuals who had no one and nowhere to turn to. As a result of his illness and growing activism, the elders at MCC – who struggled up to this point with how to

¹⁵⁶ Pieters, August 2015.

address the AIDS epidemic – finally had to admit that he was sick. The catharsis that occurred as a result helped save both Pieters and, ultimately, the church:

People started apologizing to me. I had found somebody to deliver me communion. I stuck with the church, I was with MCC, and I forgave a lot of people who were repentant. They were genuinely repentant of their attitudes about my illness in '82 and '83. Ken Martin, who was the pastor now of MCC in the Valley in North Hollywood. I was diagnosed two weeks before Easter, and he said, "I'd like you to preach the Easter sermon." I said Easter? They told me I'm dying, don't you mean Good Friday? He said, "No, you need to preach Easter." It was one of the most valuable gifts, one of the most wonderful gifts that anybody could have given me at that moment in my life. I had to really look at what it meant to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a person, who was told he had eight months left to live. What I found out, as I thought about it and meditated on it, and prayed about it, I thought if God is greater than the death of Jesus on the cross, then God must be greater than AIDS.¹⁵⁷

Pieters's story exemplifies the sad truth that even progressive organizations that were openly accepting of LGBT people had a difficult time when it came to addressing the AIDS epidemic. Pieters lead both MCC and other communities and individuals in a new life and renewal. If God is greater than the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, for Pieters, that meant that God is ultimately greater than both the AIDS epidemic and those individuals, like Falwell, who saw it as a response to society's acceptance of homosexuality. Furthermore, as Pieters describes: "I can still dance, I can still laugh, I can still be fully alive in the face of death."¹⁵⁸

We Are All Terminal

According to the World Health Organization, since the beginning of the epidemic, more than 70 million people have been infected with HIV/AIDS and roughly 35 million

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

people have died.¹⁵⁹ In the face of death, Pieters looked into the darkness and refused to become another statistic or another point used by either liberals, who didn't know what to do with the AIDS epidemic, or conservatives, who used their pulpits to bully and classify HIV/AIDS as a gay disease. As a religious person, Pieters knew that if God was greater than the death of Jesus on the cross, then God was, by all accounts, greater than AIDS. It was that mantra and new way of life that got him and his chosen community through some of the most difficult times of their lives. Nothing sums this up more perfectly than Pieters' own words that even with death at his doorstep, he could still dance and laugh, no matter what obstacle was ahead of him. Pieters found his community in the Metropolitan Community Church and it proved to be the force that would ultimately save him when he was told he had less than a year to live. Community proved to be the force that saved many of my interviewees from lives of loneliness. In a 1985 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Pieters, in discussing the cost of staying in the closet, said: "I may have never contracted AIDS if I had never come out of the closet, but the closet would have suffocated me. My spirit would have died."¹⁶⁰ Indeed, it was as a result of his diagnosis that he began to feel that God was finally beside him, and his community, battling the disease so he could live. More importantly, Pieters,

like other members of his church, [believed] that his sexuality [was] a gift from God. That theological position has helped him dismiss in his own mind the argument of some fundamentalist Christians that AIDS is God's curse on homosexuals.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ World Health Organization, "HIV/AIDS." Accessed December 16, 2018.
<https://www.who.int/gho/hiv/en/>

¹⁶⁰ Patricia Biederman, "AIDS-Stricken Pastor of Homosexual Sect Clings to His Faith," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1985.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Pieters did not believe that God was punishing him. He believed God was struggling against the disease just like he and so many members of his community in Metropolitan Community Church were. However, as Pieters came to realize, it was because he had his community and his God at his side that he was able to live, push through, beat the worst projections, and live a life that inspired many others. Pieters understands that it was only as a result of being truthful to himself that he has been able to live a life of his choosing without regret or shame. Specifically, Pieters knows that “no one has any guarantees. All we have is today. We are all terminal.”¹⁶²

¹⁶² Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Agency, Faith, and LGBT Identity

One of the main points of conversation during my interviews with openly religious or faithful individuals had to do with their relationship to their sexual identity. We frequently discussed how they navigated their religious beliefs and sexuality, especially when the latter put them at odds with their religious communities or faith traditions. For example, many of my interviewees grappled with coming out to their devout families or religious communities. However, questions about their ability to negotiate internal feelings about sexuality with their faith were superseded by both their unwavering belief in God and the conviction that they were neither damned nor sinful for being LGBT. While speaking up or expressing themselves in specific ways in religious settings often led to a variety of conflicts, they still defined their agency as a contradictory force that they grappled with on a daily basis in order to exist within homophobic or non-progressive religions.

Agency within Conservative Religious Spaces

Defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently or to make their own free choices, agency has an established history within American religions to act as both an oppressive and empowering force. Feminism and the gay-rights movement defined and created new spaces for women and LGBT individuals to transform from passive participants to active agents within oppressive or conservative spaces. The definition and use of agency throughout the study of American religious history is vital to exploring and deconstructing what Catherine Brekus refers to as “the problem with historical

agency.”¹⁶³ Individuals who choose to leave their conservative religious traditions or communities in search of more affirming spaces, as well as those who stay, simultaneously affirm and critique their agency.

The study of agency and the theoretical approach to its use within American religions would not be complete without R. Marie Griffith’s *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Griffith emphasizes the use of liberal and communal tools typically associated with and created by radical feminists. These tools act as a way to bridge traditions in order to show how agency can be defined by the women in conservative traditions and used as an empowering agent regardless of how the modern world views these traditions. One way that Griffith theorizes the agency of women in conservative religious traditions is through an exploration of prayer. Throughout her study, she examines Women’s Aglow Fellowship International, the largest interdenominational evangelical women’s organization in the world, to show how “prayer is a powerful medium of expression, alliance, and desire” that is commonly utilized by women in conservative spaces.¹⁶⁴ Griffith’s use of Aglow questions the larger interactions of gender, religion, and the role of agency in the backdrop of contemporary America. As a result of the rise of the Pentecostal movement, which originated in the United States near the turn of the 20th century, women in conservative religious traditions discovered and defined both a place and role in their community regardless of how oppressive, anti-modern, or anti-feminist the outside world deemed them to be. As a result, we can relate the various ways Aglow members choose to stay in or leave their religious communities regardless of oppressive teachings or rhetoric to

¹⁶³ R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

the way LGBT individuals respond to these same environments. Through working within feminist frameworks, Griffith is able to point out that the quest for women's equality and agency does not, or at least should not, entail contempt for "traditional disciplines and the people who try to live them."¹⁶⁵ As Aglow has grown exponentially, Griffith's point about the definition and use of agency within conservative religious cultures still rings true: just because someone doesn't call themselves a feminist doesn't mean that they cannot or do not engage in forms of feminist praxes.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's account of the women's movement in the black Baptist church parallels the varying ways women were able to redefine their positions in a patriarchal institution, as well as use their individual sense of agency for self-empowerment. Similar to Griffith's argument about the submission of Aglow women to their husbands, black women in the Baptist church felt responsible for the reading and molding of men, as well as for influencing them for the better. Higginbotham states that the "feminist theologians of the black Baptist church did not characterize woman as having a fragile, impressionable nature, but rather as having a capacity to influence man. They described woman's power of persuasion over the opposite sex as historically positive."¹⁶⁶ Black women in the Baptist church were able to utilize their individual power and agency in the domestic sphere to stress their feminine characteristics while maintaining the image of woman as comforter with the "public responsibility of prophesying and spreading the gospel."¹⁶⁷ Although men were still the leaders of congregations, the success of the black and Baptist churches, like many

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 205.

¹⁶⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

religions in America, resulted in the care, compassion, and dedication that women put into their religious tradition and community on a daily basis. Defined as a new type of politics of respectability, black women and their support of various social causes, such as women's suffrage and civil rights, cemented their role as leaders within their religious communities regardless of whether their leadership came from the pulpit or the pew.

The connections to prayer and agency have many commonalities for women in conservative religious communities as well as in the struggle LGBT individuals face. Robert Orsi's *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes*, draws parallels to salvation in similar ways to Griffith's exploration of Aglow. Through examining St. Jude, the Catholic Saint of hopeless causes, Orsi stresses that the medium of prayer activates the agency of women in conservative religious spaces because it offers them a form of salvation. Devotional culture created many voices but figures like "Jude are cultural double agents, constituting and destabilizing both culture and self."¹⁶⁸ In theorizing agency in conservative religious causes, the medium of prayer, as shown by Orsi and Griffith, creates a false standard for women and LGBT people to live up to.

There are many similarities to the ways that agency can be both defined and acted upon in conservative religious spaces between women and the LGBT community. Although each group has its own unique set of experiences, LGBT individuals who choose to remain in conservative religious spaces face struggles that are comparable in many ways to those faced by women and other under-represented groups. The rise of the Moral Majority, a prominent American political organization commonly associated

¹⁶⁸ Robert Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

with the Christian right, in 1979 helped create a successful anti-gay political force throughout the 1980s and early 90s that played a key role in leveraging fear to convince LGBT individuals to stay within their proverbial closets or to leave their specific religious traditions entirely. While central figures such as Anita Bryant or Jerry Falwell gained public and political influence by criticizing society's growing acceptance of issues such as abortion, women's equality, and gay rights, it was their role in shaping the rhetoric around the HIV/AIDS epidemic that caused the most harm to members of the LGBT community.

Although a number of gay and lesbian individuals may have already left the religious traditions that they were born into, as discussed in previous chapters, Jordan shows how the appeal of religion or faith during the HIV/AIDS epidemic brought a number of gay men back to churches after long absences. He states: "[Gay men] came in search of burials, blessings on their unions, or spiritual clarity...Facing AIDS, a number of gay men went back to the Christian churches in which they had been raised—when they could get through the doors."¹⁶⁹ In the face of death, gay men tried to seek comfort in the religious traditions and families they were born into because of the lack of community or of an understanding of the epidemic itself. Even accepting communities, such as the Metropolitan Community Church, didn't know how to react to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially during a time when many of their congregants were dying. While they tried to offer solace, they were combating rhetoric that defined "AIDS [as] a lethal judgment of God on the sin of homosexuality and also the judgment of God on America for enduring this vulgar, perverted and reprobate lifestyle."¹⁷⁰ While the

¹⁶⁹ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 172.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

anti-gay rhetoric LGBT people heard at the national level from leading figures like Falwell influenced similar figures at the local level, it also forced both open and closeted individuals to grapple with either staying in their specific traditions to work for reform on the inside or leaving altogether.

Faithfully LGBT

I met Justin through his work in LGBT activist circles in Los Angeles in 2015.¹⁷¹ Raised in Orange County, he grew up in a conservative area of Southern California and this influenced both his coming out and how he engaged publicly with his sexuality. When we discussed his coming out process, Justin stated:

I first told my parents that I was struggling with homosexuality when I was about twelve. And that was after I had told my Youth Pastor first, and he had kind of pushed me along to tell them. And then it wasn't until I was about nineteen that I essentially like fully came out to them and told them, like, no this isn't just like, you know, a small part of my life, like, this is a significant element of who I am. Like, I'm actually gay, and you know, I might date and I, for me it was something of you know, wanting to make sure like, that they'd be able to handle it. I was like, I want to know that you guys will be here, like, if I date someone or you know, whatever it ends up looking like. So that was, yeah, when I was nineteen was when I was more fully was coming out and then kind of publicly came out more when I was probably about twenty.¹⁷²

Justin felt the pain that many LGBT individuals who grew up in both conservative and homophobic communities and religious traditions understand all too well. He wanted to come out to his conservative evangelical community, which was very important to him, but like many LGBT individuals, he did not know how or have the strength to do it quite yet. Justin also experienced anxiety while a student at the religiously conservative Wheaton College in Illinois, which is consistently ranked among the worst schools for

¹⁷¹ Justin only wished to be identified by his first name.

¹⁷² Justin in discussion with the author, August 2015.

LGBT students.¹⁷³ In a survey by Campus Pride, a nonprofit organization that aims to create safe college environments for LGBT students, the organization’s “shame list” cites Wheaton as a harmful location to LGBT students because of their openly anti-LGBT policies, programs and practices.¹⁷⁴ Although Justin identifies as Christian, he primarily identifies as “post-evangelical,” as a reaction against his experience both growing up in a devoutly evangelical Christian environment and attending a conservative evangelical college. More specifically, he held on to his religion as a cultural and social act that was a critical part of his growing up. While his college espoused a conservative mindset, this was familiar to Justin as a result of the environment he was raised in. He understood what it meant to negotiate his sexual identity within an evangelical milieu.

For Justin, finding community in these settings meant negotiating his faith and sexuality in terms of the rhetoric he encountered on a regular basis. Coming out in a heavily conservative religious institution, Justin found himself existing in two worlds:

I think at first it was a lot of trying the process on my own and you know, coming to terms and figuring out how that negotiation looked in my life because I had seen the two as being very you know, contradictory. So I think when, I mean, I even think back to when I first became like really dedicated to my faith was around the same time that I was coming to terms with my attractions when I was about twelve or thirteen. And I think in a lot of ways they were, it was kind of, it would seem to me as kind of a give and take that like, because that’s how it had been promised to me a little bit, was that the like, better of a Christian I become, the more of a Christian I become, the less I will you know, struggle with the issues I experience. And so, I think I had thought that me becoming more dedicated to my faith meant becoming less gay. I think for me it was a lot of negotiations with myself of relearning what I had, you know, I thought believed about the world, what I thought I knew about my faith, and then also my you know, my individual identities and then once I became more comfortable in my

¹⁷³ “Lists rank Wheaton College among worst schools for LGBTQ students,” *Chicago Tribune* (August 31, 2016).

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

own right it was something of negotiating with the communities for you know, respect.¹⁷⁵

Wanting to help others live their authentic lives, Justin started working with One Wheaton, an unaffiliated LGBT organization of Wheaton College alumni. This group helped Justin reconcile the different elements of his life, which in turn allowed him to balance both the religious element of himself and his sexuality. Justin was able to find and discover and help create the community that enabled him to become the LGBT activist that he is today.

Justin discovered that much of the anxiety he experienced resulted from his foundation as a religious person. After discovering this, he began to work on creating values that reflected the religion that he chose and the social justice aspect of his religious education that he found comforting. Justin needed to be out to both the religious and LGBT communities he claimed in order to move past the injustices he saw and experienced prior to coming to terms with his identity. Anonymity wasn't an option and Justin began pushing for an LGBT organization on campus, discovering in the process that silence was the preferred option for the LGBT community at Wheaton College:

Once I started pushing for a student group on campus I faced a lot more direct attacks. They knew of me as “a gay student” that is trying to start a group.¹⁷⁶

Justin discovered that there was a price for being out and open about his sexuality at Wheaton and saw the need to change the campus climate that he existed in. He became a vocal, public proponent for Wheaton College's first gay-straight alliance in 2013, which in many ways represented a direct attack against the college's

¹⁷⁵ Justin, August 2015.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

administration. While Justin could have left Wheaton, he chose to stay because he knew that the community that he was fighting for was more important. From being closeted to being open about his sexuality in one of the most homophobic environments an LGBT Christian could find themselves in, Justin understood that his wellbeing was not as important as the mission he found himself on:

The more that I came to terms with my own sexuality, the more I recognized the hell of what some of those other students were dealing with and the fact that I was and am incredibly privileged in a lot of ways and I think I saw it as kind of a moral obligation to speak out since that had been handed to me. I recognized that I had been in positions of authority on campus in terms of student government. I had been in like high administrative positions and so I knew the right people. I knew how the system worked. I had recognition within some of the people there. I had the right connections and for me to stand back when I had the opportunity to fight injustice I say, you know, I saw myself stepping back as being its own kind of injustice.

And I felt a duty if I could to help protect some of the students that weren't able to protect themselves. Because although I was dealing with like some pretty serious mental health issues, anxiety and that kind of stuff, like, I was still surviving. I was still you know, making it through and I still had a better place to speak from than some of the other students, especially the vulnerable ones that were unable to continue classes.¹⁷⁷

Justin became a voice for those who had none. At the expense of his own reputation, Justin helped create a supportive community in a conservative space that would be the beacon for people like himself to find solace in even after he graduated. As a result of Justin and subsequent activists who followed in his footsteps, a supportive community continues to thrive.

Turning to another example from my interviews, Eliel Cruz was born in Puerto Rico and grew up outside of Chicago before moving to Georgia in high school. Eliel later attended Andrews University, the flagship Seventh-Day Adventist school. When

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

he was 11, he went online and searched for the word bisexual because he was not just attracted to one specific sex. After discovering more about what it meant, Eliel started to identify as bisexual, coming out to himself and eventually accepting his sexual orientation. However, as Eliel started coming out to more of his peers, especially at his Seventh-day Adventist school, he quickly came up against a disapproving administration and was eventually expelled. While expulsion for being openly bisexual was bad enough, this was also how he came out to his parents. When the school informed his family that he was being expelled for being openly bisexual, Eliel had to have the conversation about his sexuality because his school outed him.

Religion was very important to his family. As Eliel put it, he came from a “really supportive family in a sense,” who understood the importance of being there for their son during this tense time. While they didn’t agree with his sexuality at first, they soon came to both theological and personal acceptance. Although it was a journey, his family affirmed to Eliel that although you could come from a conservative religious family, they too, could come to accept and love you regardless of what was being preached from the pulpit.

The pain that Eliel discovered after being kicked out of his school and excommunicated from his local church for being bisexual is something that continues to drive him to create open and affirming spaces for LGBT individuals. Specifically, Eliel stated that it took time to become comfortable with his faith again because he felt rejected for his sexual identity. Eliel’s identity is still tied to his background as a Seventh-day Adventist, but it is one that he’s continued to shape through his cultural, social, and sexual experiences to better understand why faith means so much to him.

However, one thing that stood out the most during our conversations was the idea of community: both in terms of his original church and, ultimately, the one he found after being excommunicated:

I started doing homeschooling. Then I got my GED and I was actually afraid to go to a public school around here, not because I hadn't gone to public school – but that was part of it – but because I'm in the South and I was dealing with crime-type things. I had my car defaced with the word "faggot," got into some fights, things like that. So I didn't feel, I still really don't feel 100% safe being in the South. So I didn't have community. I was very, very isolated and I think that it was through a personal relationship with Christ that I was able to regain any kind of thing.

I was about 18. I recognized that I still had faith in God and I wasn't dependent on a community, and I would like community but I don't have to have it in order to be saved, in order to have my faith. So that's what took two to three years, was me de-compacting that, always believing that it was only through community and through this church system that I would be saved, that I would be able to have a relationship with Christ, that somehow they were my contacts, and it wasn't until I realized I can have a direct relationship that I was like okay, I don't need you guys and I'm good and I'm okay if one of us is a Christian. I don't have to ever go to this church and I'm fine with that. It took a little bit, but we got there.¹⁷⁸

Community represented a place that wasn't necessarily a church, but where people came together because they chose to do so. While Eliel struggled with coming out and was punished as a result, he discovered the activist community that would soon save him, and so many others, as a result. Much like divine intervention, activism, for Eliel, chose him:

My activism came out of a need to survive. My activism chose me. I never planned or thought about being an activist. In fact, I told my mother, when I was 18 driving to school, that I would never speak about my sexual orientation with a religious person ever again, and now I'm speaking about it internationally on a huge platform. It came out of a personal situation in which I felt unsafe at my school campus, and it has to do with a same-sex relationship at my school.

All these things that I felt God being like you need to do this and sometimes I tried to ignore Him but you can't ignore God very long and they just came out of

¹⁷⁸ Eliel Cruz in discussion with the author, July 2015.

me trying to make the spaces, the religious spaces that LGBT people would like to be in, that sometimes LGBT people don't have a choice. There's so many kids who were sent to a Christian college that it was either go to a Christian college or you're not going to get college paid for, to make it safer for them to just survive.¹⁷⁹

In conservative religious spaces, LGBT people oftentimes have to find ways to survive. Whether that is remaining closeted until they are able to come out or by creating, as in Eliel's case, community spaces where people can find each other. For Eliel, the Gay-Straight Alliance acted as a kind of divine guidance that made him feel like he was on the right path and that signified the importance of his Christian upbringing, which is still with him to this day. Being part of a religious community, while he still hasn't found one specifically that he fully identifies with, as well as the LGBT community are critical because he sees himself playing a role in helping bridge the gap that exists between both groups.

One thing that I discovered throughout my interviews with people in religious traditions, or individuals who were still openly faithful, was their sense of longing for comfort. For many, coming out about their sexuality cost them more than just their community; it cost them the contentedness that their faith brought to them. While many individuals discussed the trauma they went through, finding out that they could openly exist with both their faith and their sexuality brought back the sense of comfort that they felt they had lost. If I learned anything through all of these interviews about what it meant to be openly LGBT and a person of faith, it is the fact that without community, either chosen or created, many of my interviewees may not have survived to tell me their story.

¹⁷⁹ Eliel Cruz, July 2015.

Fear, Agency, and Apology

One extreme example of LGBT Christians' response to conservative spaces in their search for individual agency is the ex-gay program. Often referred to as "praying the gay away," this tactic forced individuals to undergo drastic and at-times life-threatening programs to appease the individuals in their communities and members of their immediate family, who prioritized religious identity over one's sexual orientation. During the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, ex-gay programs experienced an influx of individuals seeking treatment out of fear that they too would suffer from the biblical plague killing gays that preachers sermonized about from their pulpits. Facing AIDS forced gay men to go back to the Christian churches of their birth for spiritual salvation or, alternatively, to seek out and build new accepting congregations and communities. Spaces like the Metropolitan Community Church aided individuals adversely affected by the polemic of conservative religious leaders to rediscover and fully accept that they could navigate their religious and sexual identities together as one. Actions such as the ordination of Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire in the Episcopal Church point towards a future where LGBT individuals won't have to remain in the closet out of fear, but rather one in which they can openly and freely express their sexual identity.

Agency, both as a lived experience and a theory, is critical to studying the roles minority and underrepresented communities face in conservative and patriarchal spaces. In the case of women and LGBT individuals, understanding the need to both redefine and create their own sense of agency is vital to the critical study of these communities. There is a longstanding history of both women and LGBT communities

working within and outside of their individual conservative or non-affirming religious spaces to elicit change and work towards a definition of agency that is in conjunction with their lived experiences. Appearances can be deceiving and while some traditions may externally appear to subjugate women and LGBT individuals, within these traditions there is often a great diversity of experience, wherein some individuals feel empowered rather than oppressed. Agency will continue to come in different forms, but how society validates those varying definitions is critical to the important conversations that need to occur both now and in the future. Although issues like gay marriage and women's rights currently dominate the mainstream media, the issues of tomorrow will fluctuate. The varying responses we give to those deeply involved in these issues, regardless of what side of the proverbial aisle they stand on, are crucial to their success.

When I met Jason, he was a 21-year-old Chinese-American student at a conservative college in the Midwest and deeply closeted.¹⁸⁰ He identified as a Christian and religion was an important part of his upbringing.¹⁸¹ He was raised in an evangelical denomination and went to two churches growing up. On Friday nights he would attend Chinese fellowship and on Sundays and Wednesdays he attended an English-speaking church and youth group. His parents were deeply involved in their church and served on the board of elders. Although Jason was out to a few distant relatives who were accepting, he remained publicly closeted out of fear for his own psychological and financial security. Jason was not out to his parents and was financially dependent on them and, because they wanted him to excel in school, he was not allowed to get an

¹⁸⁰ "Jason" is a pseudonym given to maintain the respondent's anonymity.

¹⁸¹ "Jason" in discussion with the author, September 2015.

outside job that would allow him to be more financially independent so he could come out and take care of himself should his family cut him off. After graduating from college, Jason hopes to enroll in graduate school, something he will need his family to help pay for, and, as a result, he does not foresee coming out to his parents anytime soon, although it is always on his mind:

I just want to be careful. It's not like – [I mean] it's an important part of who I am and it really influences a lot of things, while when I come home and [my parents] ask if I've been dating anyone, it's like, 'Oh yeah, lots of women.' It's not really an integral part that they need to know about me. When I tell them, that's when they'll know, but it's not the be-all, end-all sort of conversation [right now].¹⁸²

Jason, like many other LGBT individuals in conservative or homophobic circles, engaged in what queer theorist José Muñoz defined as “disidentification.”

Disidentification is a performative strategy that “minority subjects” engage in to survive “normative citizenship.”¹⁸³ Posited as a way to deal with the constraints of dominant ideology, disidentification allows individuals to simultaneously “work in” and “against” structures of heteronormativity. Utilizing the work of performance artists such as Vaginal Davis, Muñoz shows that disidentification does not have a “fixed identity” but rather encompasses many forms and ways of being. Minority subjects who utilize disidentification create a “counterpublic sphere,” which allows for new and more nuanced ways of understanding sexuality and subjectivity through inclusive social relationships. This new space is called “identities-in-difference,” and calls for a negotiation and reconstruction of normative social and moral codes that demand fixed identities upon minority subjects and communities. The new space acts as a disruptive force that creates a site of both resistance and revision. The action of disidentification

¹⁸² “Jason”, September 2015.

¹⁸³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

allows for another way of being, one that is both definable and indefinable and where individuals are able to play with and construct identities that are not constraining, but rather freeing acts of expression and lived experiences.

The act of disidentification, whether or not my interviewees were consciously aware of it, was commonly adopted as a survival mechanism in response to the hostile or normative environments that they oftentimes found themselves existing within. Whether or not these situations occurred through their religious communities or at home with conservative family members, many, like Jason, disidentified for survival and, as a result, created a hybrid identity that allowed these spaces to become sites of resistance and revision.

Jason found it difficult to grapple with his sexual identity and his faith, but eventually found a way to negotiate his religious background with his new understanding of what it meant to be gay. Community was always a vital part of his life growing up and now at his conservative religious college in the Midwest, his community began to look a lot like him, as he found other LGBT individuals grappling with the same issues. Jason met another LGBT activist at his college who, like himself, was negotiating the issue of his sexuality and his religious identity, which was very important to him. While on a trip to Paris, Jason met Justin, and he introduced him to books about the intersection between theology and sexuality. Through this new knowledge, he discovered a community of people much like himself, who faced similar circumstances and navigated them successfully. As Jason recalled:

One week I would read about theology that affirms same-sex relationships. The next week I would read about theology that asks for celibacy. So it was just the whole entire summer, I was reading through these books or these articles. That's kind of how I processed through it. I didn't really get a chance to talk about

it with a lot of people, because I was at home. So, I guess it was just very bookish and article-oriented. From there, that's where I kind of was like, 'You know, being gay and being Christian doesn't really seem to be a big problem to me.' So, I came to get a side of that story and I now find myself on the [other side] of the conversation. So, that's just kind of how I got through that horrible section. This is how I can live out [both] my faith and [my] homosexuality.¹⁸⁴

Jason views this transition in how he dealt with his spirituality and his sexuality as a transformative process, because it helped him come to terms with the pain caused by those within his conservative religious tradition. While many LGBT individuals may dream of being open about their sexuality in their conservative religious communities, Jason's dream of forgiveness went further, to a place that he wishes he was shown when he was initially grappling with these issues. In trying to understand the pain and hurt that religious spaces, like the one he was raised in or later found at college, caused, he stated that he dreams of one day "go[ing] to a Pride Parade and be[ing] with a Christian group that says: 'I'm sorry.'"¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ "Jason", September 2015.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Chosen Community and LGBT Liberation

According to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey of over 35,000 U.S. adults, LGBT individuals tend to be more skeptical of churches and other religious institutions than straight adults.¹⁸⁶ This survey, which coincides with the Center's 2013 survey, signified that LGBT Americans feel major religions are unfriendly toward LGBT people as a result of the growing divide between religious conservatism and the LGBT community. A major reason for this growing change is a result of LGBT individuals' concern about churches involved in politics.¹⁸⁷

The growing shift towards religious intervention in social and political movements has been a major point of concern for many of my interviewees. However, while this concern continues to rise in accordance with the Center's survey results, LGBT individuals also reported that churches bring people together and strengthen community bonds. Community is a focal point for which many LGBT individuals have been forced to either find their own tribe after being excommunicated from the religious traditions they were born or raised in. While religion is a major focal point for how many individuals are able to discover both their spiritual and communal selves, the growing LGBT community and the spaces, families, and friendships created as a result, have replaced the role traditional religious communities used to serve in their lives.

A prime example of the how the LGBT community has offered a new generation of queer activists another life to choose from is exemplified through Eliel's new life in New York's LGBT community. Eliel channeled his activism into queer nightlife where he

¹⁸⁶ "Lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans are more critical of churches than straight adults are," Aleksandra Sandstrom and Philip Schwadel, Fact Tank, June 13, 2019, <https://pewrsr.ch/2Zks8Ru>

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

was able to explore his own gender and femininity. Through cerulean eye makeup and matching lip-gloss, Eliel embraced the power that the New York queer community could play in his liberation from his conservative Seventh-day Adventist background. Eliel states that this new community allowed him to feel “comfortable putting on make-up, 11-inch heels, and a leotard,” and experience liberation through dancing, music, and a new form of worship.¹⁸⁸ With 2019 marking the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, Eliel understands now, more than ever, the importance of LGBT people being able to come together without the fear of harassment, retaliation, and bodily harm. Although Eliel is still religious, his newfound queer nightlife community has quickly become a form of worship that he gets to participate in nightly with other LGBT individuals who have also fled their previous communities in search of something new and empowering.

The goal of this dissertation was to re-write religion back into the narrative of the LGBT movement and provide a more comprehensive examination of the divide between sexuality and spirituality. Through the power of my stakeholder interviews, their voices and stories bridged conflicting identities to help achieve and create a community that is supportive and empowering. Through the new inroads created by my interviewees writing their voices back into the larger LGBT and religious narrative, new roles were created for the LGBT movement to take the place of religious and faith-based communities during heightened times of homophobia. The new discourse behind the LGBT rights movement’s recent popularity and credibility in U.S. popular culture created a generation of activists who grew up both within and outside of religious communities

¹⁸⁸ Zachary Zane, “New York’s queer nightlife scene is fueling a new generation of activists,” *DAZED*, June 2019.

and affirmed an individual's sexuality as an important part of their identity rather than a sinful one.

Through unraveling the stories behind the various struggles each community, both religious and LGBT affiliated, has undergone – or is currently undergoing – newer generations of both closeted and open LGBT individuals and religiously-affiliated men and women grew up knowing about the fight for and against LGBT rights and inclusion.¹⁸⁹ As a result of including the voices of both religious and non-religious LGBT individuals, new constructive and effective discourses developed that further bridge the divide between religion and sexuality rather than create a wider gap. E.J. Dionne Jr., in an article titled “No wonder there’s an exodus from religion” in *The Washington Post* stated, “many young people came to regard religion as judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical and too political.”¹⁹⁰ This growing feeling was only heightened with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, with the majority of Evangelicals backing his candidacy. While the Evangelical backing of Trump in 2016 appears to be the height of hypocrisy, as Dionne points out: “religion has a strong case to make to itself – to the young and to everyone else – given its historical role as a prod to personal and social change.”¹⁹¹ Trump and many other conservative leaders have inflicted a significant amount of damage upon religious institutions and contributed to the growing divide that the Pew Research Center and other sociological surveys have pointed out.

Ultimately this dissertation explored the various reasons LGBT individuals either chose to stay in churches that promulgated homophobic rhetoric or chose to leave.

¹⁸⁹ “Gay Rights and the Church’s Evolving Role,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 2011.

¹⁹⁰ Dionne, E.J. “No wonder there’s an exodus from religion.” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2019. Accessed May 20, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/no-wonder-theres-an-exodus-from-religion/2018/05/06/4ad8c33a-4feb-11e8-84a0-458a1aa9ac0a_story.html.

¹⁹¹ Dionne, “No wonder there’s an exodus from religion.”

Based on the experiences recounted in all of my in-person interviews, even though conservative religious traditions may have caused great harm to the LGBT community, they, in the end, helped create the impetus for what we now refer to as the modern-day LGBT movement. If individuals had never been forced out and left to look elsewhere for a welcoming and meaningful community that validated both their sexuality and spirituality, the LGBT landscape of the 21st century would look drastically different.

One of the major takeaways from Anthony Petro's *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* is the form that religious power takes in today's increasingly modern and secular nation. Petro discovers a new way to exist within this evolving structure and defines it as "moral citizenship."¹⁹² My interviewees, as well as the larger LGBT community who, like many of them, engaged in acts of faith, liberation, and LGBT identity, are the new moral citizens of the United States during a time when society is expanding to re-examine how these individuals have helped shape America since the 1950s.

Grounding these moral citizens through their stories and identities has allowed for a new way to explore LGBT identity, community, and faith as one congruent piece versus multiple parts. My interviewee Laurie-Ann Cota exemplified this point when discussing her faith and sexuality. Although Laurie-Ann passed away in 2016, her memory and words live on through both my interview and the lasting impact she had on so many individuals in the LGBT communities she was part of. When asked about her Jewish and sexual identities, Laurie-Ann stated that they were: "part of the fabric of who

¹⁹² Petro, *After the Wrath of God*.

[she is].”¹⁹³ While Laurie-Ann understood her identities went together, the struggle she faced in getting to that place was one she had to ascertain through reaching out and finding a community that would accept her and who she was versus the orthodox upbringing she may have had to experience had she not sought out a new chosen community. While Laurie-Ann may no longer be with us, her story, its impact, and the overall importance religion and sexuality played in her life and identity, and so many others that I interviewed, pinpoint the need for further inquiry into religious and LGBT identities and the roles they have in shaping each other’s futures.

¹⁹³ Laurie Ann Cota in discussion with the author, October 2015

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