

“I Found God in The Glory Hole”: The Moral Career of a Gay Christian

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This article examines processes wherein Gay Christian men transition from closeted religious people to openly Gay Christians. Based on 36 months of fieldwork in a south-eastern lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christian church and a synthesis of research into LGBT Christian experience over the past 25 years, we conceptualize these transformations as a moral career consisting of (1) essentializing religious belief and practice (2) emotionalizing early religious experience, (3) spiritualizing coming out of the closet and religion, and (4) sexualizing coming back to religious participation. In so doing, Gay Christian men interpreted the stages of their lives as an ongoing sexual-religious process wherein they became the spiritual and sexual beings they believed God always wanted them to be. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding (1) the moral career of a Gay Christian, (2) the usefulness of conceptualizing religious and sexual transitions as elements of a moral career, and (3) the reproduction of religious privilege.

Introduction

After church one night, a young man who recently began attending asked, “Do any of you ever wonder how we got here? I mean, I don’t think I ever expected to be out with a gay church group when I was a kid.” Laughing a little bit before wiping his mouth, Tim¹ said, “Oh brother, I think we’ve all been there.” People around the table nodded, and Tim continued, “The way I see it is everyone here had to come out of the church to come out of the closet, but we ended up coming back to the church and maybe that means the church is where we were always supposed to be.” The young man smiled, took a bite of his lemon pie, and the table became quiet for a moment.

Barney added, “Its like this, God put us in churches so we could *learn to be good people* and handle how hard gay life is, but when we were able to be ourselves we lost our way even though God was always there.” Gesturing to the table, he continued, “This is simply us coming back to *where we were always supposed to be*,² but just as full people, you know, the way God wanted.” As Barney finished speaking, Derek added, “I think it happens all the time since *people just need God*.”

Like Tim, Barney, Derek, and the new attendee, many Christian sexual minorities must make sense of an unexpected life path. They are all aware of the intense struggles one must endure to fashion a coherent identity out of categories deemed incongruent by existing institutional and ideological frameworks. Over the last 25 years, sociologists in varied fields have explored many ways Christian sexual minorities accomplish such identity integration (see, e.g., Barton 2012; Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015; Rodriguez 2010 for reviews). In so doing, however, some scholars have championed sexual minority religiosity as a potential pathway to greater sexual equality while others have noted many ways such efforts may reproduce existing patterns of racial, gender, class, and sexual inequalities in the pursuit of religious legitimacy (see, e.g., Harris 2014; Moon 2004; Wilcox 2009). In this article, we utilize the combination of an in-depth ethnographic study of Gay Christian men and research concerning Christian sexual minorities over the past couple decades to outline common “turning points” (Johnson and Best 2012) in the construction of Gay Christian selves, and some ways such efforts resist and reproduce existing patterns of social inequality.

To this end, our analysis focuses on insights from our case combined with existing findings to shed light upon common turning points or experiences in the life course of many Gay Christian men seeking to navigate the intersection of religion and sexuality in contemporary American society. As Barton (2012) noted, gay—as well as lesbian, bisexual, and transgender—Christians experience life between dominant religious norms that decry lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, and normative depictions of LGBT communities as oppositional to religion (see also O’Brien 2004). The struggle to define themselves as both LGBT and Christian unfolds as they move within and between explicitly religious and LGBT settings, situations, and assumptions. LGBT Christians not only seek to integrate their seemingly disparate sexual and religious selves, but also, like members of other marginalized communities (see Mason-Schrock 1996), seek to make sense of their prior life experiences in ways that grant credence to their current circumstances.

As noted above, a growing body of research focuses on LGBT Christians. Studies outline nuanced processes of emotional (Wolkomir 2006), ideological (Yip 2002), and identity (Sumerau 2012a) work they engage in to integrate their religious and sexual selves. Further, studies show some ways LGBT Christians resist homophobia in mainstream churches (Yip 1997), fashion alternative religions (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000), and reinvent rituals, beliefs, and scriptural interpretations to make room for LGBT experience (Thumma and Gray 2004). At the same time, studies have shown that these efforts often unintentionally reproduce societal patterns of inequality (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012b, 2014). Although these studies have invigorated our

understanding of LGBT Christians, we know much less about the ways Christian sexual minorities make sense of turning points in their sexual and religious lives. How do Gay Christians make sense of transformations in their sexual and religious experience?

We examine this question through an ethnographic study of a southeastern LGBT Christian church in combination with insights from previous studies of Christian sexual minorities over the past couple decades. Specifically, we analyze how Gay Christian men interpreted their sexual and religious transformations in terms of a “moral career” (Goffman 1961), which refers to a career composed of progressive stages in the beliefs one has about the self, significant others, and personal behaviors. Whereas some scholars utilize moral career frameworks to outline sequential or chronological phases or stages in a given life course, we follow other researchers who focus on specific turning points that dramatically alter the life course, but may take place at varied times and in relation to varied circumstances as a result of individual nuances in a given life (see also Johnson and Best 2012). Our analysis thus extends studies of Christian sexual minorities by outlining the moral career of a Gay Christian and demonstrating the usefulness of conceptualizing various religious and sexual experiences in terms of moral careers composed of common turning points in the life course. Rather than attempting to generalize our findings to other sexual or religious minorities, we outline stages in the moral career of a Gay Christian, which could be examined within and across various religious and sexual contexts, in relation to other types of religious or sexual careers, and in light of similar experiences suggested by studies of Christian sexual minorities over the past 25 years (Becker 1998).

Moral Careers

To better understand the life experiences of Gay Christian men, we draw on Goffman’s (1961) elaboration of a “moral career” (see also Becker 1963). Following Goffman (1961), people go through stages wherein they must interpret their selves, beliefs, behaviors, values, and rituals in relation to the most significant relationships in their lives at a given time. In so doing, they rely upon and respond to existing institutional and ideological frameworks to interpret the value of their beliefs and actions as well as the ways they may adopt, maintain, lose, or reestablish creditable or valuable selves. As a result, researchers may gain insights into the complexity of social experience by examining the ways people interpret their experiences and selves. To this end, we must evaluate the steps people suggest lead them to claim specific selves.

Although “moral career” scholarship has thus far left religious experience unexplored, prior studies suggest that examining “moral careers” may provide significant insight into the passage into and out of non-normative traditions.

For example, Becker (1963) outlines some ways drug users establish their claims to subcultural membership by leaving normative institutional frameworks to assert their creditable presence in deviant communities. Similarly, Johnson and Best (2012) show how parents leave behind existing notions of moral parenthood to become advocates for their lesbian and gay children. Further, Adler and Adler (2007) demonstrate that many forms of deviance experience historical transitions wherein people navigate both deviant and normative assumptions over the course of time. While such studies reveal ways people make sense of passage into and out of deviant identities, they also suggest outlining moral careers may shed light upon passages into and out of normative identity claims.

To this end, we focus on the ways people experiencing conflicts between normative expectations “transform the self” (Johnson and Best 2012; Liamputong 2007; Nowakowski 2016). Rather than a chronological sequence of steps or stages, such efforts may unfold at varied times in relation to shared conflicts and experiences people face in the course of their individual life courses. At the same time, such people often face shared turning points or transformations as a result of membership in groups facing similar structural conflicts and restraints. Whereas such turning points may occur at varied times and in nuanced ways (Nowakowski 2016), members of the same social group may expect to face similar conflicts and thus develop similar strategies for managing such conflicts over the life course (Johnson and Best 2012). In this article, we focus on shared strategies Gay Christians may adopt as they integrate their sexual and religious selves over the life course.

In so doing, our analysis demonstrates the social construction of a Gay Christian moral career. Specifically, we examine how Gay Christians—through their own explanations of their past and present sexual and religious experiences—outlined shared experiences other Gay Christians could expect to go through in their lives. Before presenting our analysis, we contextualize the moral career of a Gay Christian within existing insights from the past 25 years of studies concerning LGBT Christians. In so doing, we demonstrate that the moral career outlined by our respondents provides answers to common struggles, questions, and issues faced by LGBT Christians in many social contexts. As such, our elaboration of a Gay Christian moral career may shed light upon strategies utilized by many Christian sexual minorities who seek to both integrate seemingly oppositional sexual and religious selves and establish congruency between their past and their current LGBT Christian identities.

The Gay Christian Moral Career

In contemporary American society, few, if any, ideological and institutional frameworks carry more symbolic weight than religion (Barton 2012).

Specifically, researchers have demonstrated that religious ideals and assumptions permeate American society to the point where many citizens have difficulty recognizing non-religious people as worthy of full participation in America (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Further, researchers have noted that within America (Bush 2010), Christianity holds a privileged position wherein dominant interpretations of this tradition influence and serve to control the public and private behaviors of religious and non-religious people (Barton 2012), find voice and power within supposedly secular structures, policies, and legal arrangements (Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang 2013), and facilitate marginalization, harassment and discrimination against openly non-religious people (Hammer et al. 2012). Within American society, it is not surprising that people may seek moral value through Christian belief and practice.

In the case of Christian sexual minorities, however, this normative path to social acceptance is complicated by ongoing anti-LGBT campaigns (see Fetner 2008 for a review). Whereas other Americans receive constant messages suggesting they should embrace Christianity, sexual minorities receive such messages alongside assertions that their romantic and sexual desires mark them as abominations, sinners, and deviants in the eyes of God (see, e.g., Barton 2012; Loseke and Cavendish 2001; Robinson and Spivey 2007). Although some mainstream Christian groups have begun opening their doors to sexual minorities (Moon 2004) and explicitly LGBT Christian groups have emerged over time (Kane 2013), Christian sexual minorities must ultimately interpret and explain their participation within a religion that both deems them unwelcome *and* holds the keys to moral legitimacy in America (Sumerau 2014).

As a result of these larger ideological patterns, a Gay Christian moral career will likely involve stages wherein Christian sexual minorities wrestle with condemnation from dominant Christian traditions (see, e.g., Thumma 1991; Wolkomir 2006). In fact, recent analyses reveal that even as Christian groups soften their rhetoric concerning sexual minorities, they maintain the marginalization of these people while only appearing to offer greater acceptance (see Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015). While in some cases, Gay Christians will seek to change their sexualities (Erzen 2006), forego sexual activity (Creek 2013), or remain closeted in Christian churches (Pitt 2010), others will leave Christian traditions at some point to claim and experience openly gay selves, and either join LGBT Christian traditions at a later time (Wilcox 2003) or never return to Christianity (Wilcox 2009). Regardless of how they respond after the fact, Gay Christians will all likely have to make sense of Christian condemnations of LGBT people.

Since dominant Christian interpretations encourage gay people to keep their sexualities hidden (Barton 2012; Fetner 2008; Robinson and Spivey 2007), another element in a Gay Christian moral career may involve

interpreting coming out. In some cases, this may be limited to coming out of the closet to live as an openly gay person, but in other cases, Gay Christians may also have to make sense of leaving—or coming out of—Christianity. In either case, Gay Christians will likely find ways—other than those proposed by Christian traditions—to make sense of their experiences that allow them to openly embrace Gay Christian identities.

Following from the previous observation, another element of the Gay Christian moral career likely revolves around the return to Christianity. Rather than simply walking back into churches after some time off (although it is possible some sexual minorities do this), Gay Christians will likely—by themselves or others—establish explanations for their desire to participate in religion, which is often perceived to be hostile to sexual minorities (Sumerau 2014). In fact, this may be even more likely in cases where Gay Christians have previously ceased religious participation. Considering the average American’s lack of recognition of Gay Christians (Barton 2012) and arguments suggesting sexual equality can only be found via opposition to religion (Harris 2014), it would be unsurprising if explaining their return to Christianity represented a generic experience for Christian sexual minorities in a wide variety of situations.

Finally, studies have shown Gay Christians integrate their sexual and religious identity claims by conceptualizing both their religious and sexual identities as inherent parts of their being (see, e.g., Rodriguez 2010; Wilcox 2003; Wolkomir 2006). In so doing, however, studies reveal that Gay Christians often reproduce societal patterns of racial (McQueeney 2009), class-based (Wilcox 2009), gendered (Sumerau 2012b), and sexual (Sumerau 2014) inequalities. This typically occurs due to efforts of Gay Christians to demonstrate that they “really are good Christian people” by adopting common Christian interpretations of social issues. As a result, a Gay Christian moral career may involve efforts to essentialize Gay Christian selves, which may reproduce societal assumptions about the necessity of religion (see Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006) whether or not such inequality reproduction is intended or recognized at the time. In fact, in so doing, Gay Christians may demonstrate the limits of religious legitimacy in the pursuit of sexual equality outlined by scholars who suggest opposition to religion is a better path toward LGBT liberation (see Harris 2014).

In the analysis below, we examine these elements of a Gay Christian moral career. In so doing, we illustrate strategies enacted by the Gay Christian men we studied, and the ways such strategies align with disparate findings from studies of Christian sexual minorities over the past couple decades. Specifically, we analyze the ways they make sense of these experiences, and solidify their claims to integrated sexual and religious selves. As such, their construction of a moral career symbolically carves out space within Christianity for people

typically deemed beyond its boundaries while establishing congruency between their own previous experiences and their current identity claims. Through this process, however, their efforts ultimately reproduce the privileged position of Christianity in contemporary America.

Setting and Method

Data for this study derive from 36 months of participant observation in a southeastern LGBT Christian church. The first author observed and participated in worship services, board meetings, Bible studies, choir practices, outreach efforts, and social events with members. Ze³ also collected newsletters, newspaper pieces, e-mails, hymnals, pamphlets, and publications by the church and the national group it belonged to. On average, the first author spent about one-to-three hours with members during each visit conducting informal interviews whenever possible, and tape-recorded all informal interviews and meetings to supplement shorthand notes. Afterward, the first author composed detailed fieldnotes and transcribed audio recordings.

Seeking to capture “data” and “experience” commonly missed in more structured research designs (see Adams 2011), the first author engaged in regular and consistent informal interviewing with members throughout the process of observation. In some cases, these conversations were as short as 15 minutes while in other cases they lasted over an hour. Likewise, some informal interviews involved one respondent while others took place in the context of group discussions. In all cases, the first author tape-recorded such interviews and transcribed them in full. In this article, we utilize informal conversations with 70 different Gay Christian men who regularly attended and/or visited the church during the study. Rather than limiting the sample in any manner, these informal interviews were obtained by allowing the participation of those present throughout church services, meetings, and social activities during fieldwork (see also Adams 2011).

While the bulk of the examples provided in this article come from informal interviews, we also utilize interviews with prominent members of the church. The first author conducted 10 life history interviews with members. Interviews lasted between 3 and 4 hours and were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. This sample of formal interviews included 10 white gay men selected because of informal or formal leadership roles they held in the church (all 10 were also captured in informal interviews and thus the total sample remains 70 Gay Christian men). Unlike the open sampling strategy of the informal interviews, the life history interview respondents were explicitly selected as the 10 gay men who had the most authority in the church. We thus use examples from these interviews to compliment the fieldwork data (see also Charmaz 2006).

Even though the strategies we outline are also suggested by studies of Christian sexual minorities in a wide variety of contexts, contextual and demographic factors may have played a role in the moral career construction of these Gay Christian men (see Table 1 for Church demographics over time). The church was affiliated with the Metropolitan Community Churches—a denomination explicitly focused on, primarily composed of, and promoting the morality of LGBT Christians—located in a suburban area outside a mid-sized southern city without much of an active LGBT public presence and containing a very active, mostly conservative Christian community. The Church itself emerged as a Bible Study group in the early 1990s and acquired its own property and began hosting regular services just before the start of fieldwork. They also became more involved with the denomination and shifted from an informal community group to a more formal organization during fieldwork (see Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015 for analyses of these events).

As demonstrated in Table 1, the church was also in the midst of a major gender transition during fieldwork. As noted elsewhere (Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015; Sumerau et al. 2011; Sumerau Forthcoming, 2013, 2012a, 2012b), the church followed broader patterns in LGBT churches wherein it became more male-dominated in terms of population, culture, and authority

Table 1
Gender and Sexual Characteristics of Shepherd Church Over Time

Demographic category	Subgroup characteristics	Population halfway through fieldwork	Population at end of fieldwork
Women	Lesbian	59	15
	Trans	3	0
	Heterosexual	4	0
	Total	66	15
Men	Gay	25	30
	Trans	3	0
	Bisexual	2	0
	Heterosexual	2	0
	Total	32	30
Total church	Total	98	45

during this time (see Wilcox 2003 on this pattern in LGBT churches). While the church basically transformed from an LGBT group to a primarily Gay Male site by the end of fieldwork, it is noteworthy that the construction of moral careers is one area where gender did not emerge as a salient component of the experience of members.

In fact, our overall study population (i.e., the entirety of LGBT people involved in the church during fieldwork) articulated their lived experiences in ways that fit the framework presented below. Due to the transformations taking place in the church at the time, however, we have much less data from LBT respondents on these issues due to their focus on (1) the changes taking place in the church, (2) their establishment of their own new Bible Study group upon leaving the church, and (3) their opinions about the pastor hired during fieldwork (see Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015 for analysis of these dynamics).

Even though LBT members reported experiences that align with the framework presented in this article, we have chosen to focus our analysis on Gay Christian men in this article to avoid missing potential nuances tied to different sexual and gender identities that may have arisen if we were able to gain the same amount of life history data from LBT members (see also Wilcox 2009 for a similar decision in relation to focusing on an LBT sample). Our analysis provides a framework for further exploring the moral careers of Gay Christian men and a demonstration of the potential of undertaking similar efforts with lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians.

As noted by other scholars (see, e.g., Barton 2012; Harris 2014; Wilcox 2009), it is also possible that our own standpoints may have influenced our study. The first author, for example, is a bisexual, formerly transsexual—currently genderqueer, agnostic who was raised in a conservative Protestant tradition, but was also involved in a Metropolitan Community Church in another American city briefly in the 1990s. As ze has discussed before (Sumerau Forthcoming), members knew these details and generally responded by embracing the first author as one of their own and attempting to convert the first author back to Christianity. The other authors were initially brought into this project to lend varied perspectives since neither of them had much experience with either Christian sexual minorities or Metropolitan Community Churches. The second author approached this project as a bisexual, genderqueer agnostic raised without religion who primarily studies gender and sexualities while the third author is a heterosexual, cisgender male atheist who studies religion and non-religion, but was raised as devout member of a conservative Protestant faith. Our analysis represents the collective efforts of people with insider and outsider perspectives on religious and sexual variation in America.

Our analysis developed in an inductive fashion. Drawing on previous studies concerning Christian sexual minorities, we approached the data seeking to ascertain the ways it agreed and disagreed with existing studies in the area. To this end, we coded Gay Christian explanations of sexual and religious experiences in relation to the overall life course, disruptions in religious and sexual expectations, and transitions within and between religious and sexual identities. We came to see that Gay Christian men were outlining a moral career and consequently generated labels to capture the turning points in this career: (1) essentializing religious belief and practice, (2) emotionalizing early religious experience, (3) spiritualizing coming out of churches and closets, and (4) sexualizing religious return. Although we outline these turning points in a specific order for the sake of clarity, our respondents' varied experiences suggest Gay Christians could experience these elements of the life course in varied chronological orders.

Essentializing Religious Belief and Practice

At a fellowship lunch after worship one Sunday, the first author sat with a group of Gay Christian men discussing recent statements by a heterosexual minister. The minister argued that gay people could not be Christians because of their "sinful nature," which led Michael to ask, "*So do you think this preacher has ever read the Bible? I mean, isn't everyone really a Christian? I mean, God did create us all.*" Brian smiled and said, "*Well that is the problem with lost souls, they have forgotten the truth. We are all created in God's image, and no matter what we do God will be inside us always and you can't fight that by saying it isn't so.*" Gabriel added, "*That's it, but many people just don't see it or want to stay with God. The way I see it, well, it's like being gay, we're born this way with God inside us, everyone is.*" Nodding, Michael said, "*Yeah, everyone is born with God in their hearts, but some folks just lose their way I guess.*" Tapping the table, Gabriel said, "*Exactly, and I think it's people like this guy that just corrupt what is supposed to be the greatest thing about any of us.*"

Echoing the teachings of many LGBT Christian organizations over the past few decades (Wilcox 2003), the Gay Christians we studied defined God's presence and Christianity as inherent, natural, and essential characteristics of all people (see also Warner 2005). In so doing, they essentialized religion by arguing they were always meant to be Christian. While this tactic allowed them to cast doubters or attackers as misguided, such statements also positioned Christianity as inevitable, natural, and expected of all people. As a result, their efforts reproduced the symbolic boundary between moral religious Americans and immoral non-believers (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006).

One element of a Gay Christian moral career thus involves the ways Gay Christians essentialize their religious belief and practice. Importantly, this stage is evident throughout the other stages—as we have noted by italicizing places within the following sections and above in the manuscript where they essentialize religiosity. As a result, essentializing religious belief and practice may be an ongoing background frame—or shared definition of the situation (Goffman 1974)—Gay Christians draw upon throughout their identity integration processes. It may be that essentialized definitions of gay and Christian promoted by LGBT Christian organizations since the 1960s (Warner 2005) provide the institutional and ideological framework necessary for both the construction of a Gay Christian moral career and identity integration efforts.

While the italicized statements throughout this manuscript offer implicit examples of essentializing religion, this theme became much more explicit in many informal conversations. As Peter explained during a Bible Study meeting:

I think a lot of the problems we see come from people forgetting that God is in all of us, and that we are all kind of programmed to seek God. We forget this, and we focus on our lives instead, but God doesn't go away. We are born of God, and that's the reality that people all come to see at some point. I remember I lived with a so-called atheist for a while, but sure enough in the middle of some bad times he suddenly felt God. I had to tell him that God had always been in him, he just wasn't listening.

In the midst of choir practice, Tommy said: “Denying God’s influence in your life is like pretending you don’t have a body, where do you think you came from? I mean, it’s so simple, he is everywhere and anyone who looks will see that and know him, you just have to try and you’ll get it too.” Note that these Gay Christians do not simply believe God is within them, but rather, they argue God is an essential part of everyone. As a result, those who do not “know” God are hiding from an essential truth.

However, they didn’t just see God as an essential part of all people. They further suggested that people required God to be moral. As Micah noted at a charity event:

The people who know God are the good people; they are the moral leaders who make the world better. The people who have lost touch with God are the ones who spread hate and try to hurt other people. It’s really that simple if you pay attention. Many people claim to know God, but you can tell which ones really do.

At a board meeting, Tim agreed: “I don’t think people can be good without God and without going to church and learning how to be good. Without church, I think people just kind of fall into misery because they probably know something is missing in their lives.” For these Gay Christian men, religious belief and practice were simultaneously inherent in all people, and necessary if people wanted to reach their full moral potential.

While these statements bolstered Gay Christians' claims to authentic religious selves, they also reproduced societal patterns that marginalize non-believers while elevating the experiences, authority, and moral value of believers. Rather than a personal choice that can bring comfort and meaning to those who desire it, they defined religion as a necessary component of morality, and essentialized religious belief and practice by symbolically granting these activities unquestioned morality. Similar to the ways people construct valued identities by distancing themselves from marginalized others in many other settings (Schwalbe et al. 2000), they created moral careers by reproducing the privileged position of religion in America in their own sexual and religious lives.

Emotionalizing Early Religious Experience

On a Wednesday night in the midst of a Bible Study discussing Jesus' efforts for marginalized people, Tommy noted, "I think this is the hardest part for us. We all know what happens to different people in church." Nodding, Marcus added, "Yep, I bet we all memorized the clobber scriptures by the time we were teenagers. Hell, I know I spent hours reading and rereading all the ways I was damned." Choking up a bit, Samuel added, "What are you talking about, I still do that, but I don't cry like I did as a kid 'cause now I realize they were wrong." Mike noted, "Well that is the key. They were wrong, and God loves us and that's what we have to focus on. I think we all left churches for the same reasons, and all of us carry those scars, but we have to realize God didn't do that to us, misguided people did." As the people around the room all nodded, Tommy continued, "I think we just have to replace those bad feelings with the good feelings God will give us for coming back home," which led to applause.

Like many Gay Christian men (Wolkomir 2006), the ones we studied all recalled getting "clobbered" (i.e., marginalized, demonized, and/or denigrated) in the churches of their youth, and experiencing traumatic emotional experiences as a result of condemnation (see also Moon 2004). To make sense of these experiences in relation to their continued Christian practice, they emotionalized—or defined in emotional terms—their early religious experiences by romanticizing religious life, and directing their anger at religious people rather than God, absolving God of wrongdoing. In so doing, they argued their emotional pain was the result of "misguided" people and that God had given them these tests so they could become moral people. As such, another element of a Gay Christian moral career involves emotionalizing early religious experience.

By emotionalizing, we mean the ways people adopt emotional justifications, reasons, and rationales for a given course of action (Creek 2013). As others have noted in relation to Gay Christian support groups (Wolkomir 2006), Gay Christian constructions of "Godly Manhood" (Sumerau 2012b), and Gay Christian

adoption of celibacy to remain moral (Creek 2013), identifying as both Gay and Christian exposes Gay Christian men to significant emotional strain, which they often learn how to manage from religious organizations (see also Moon 2004). The Gay Christian men at the heart of this study echoed these patterns by lending emotional weight to positive religious experiences and directing negative emotions away from their faith. In so doing, they created space between religious and sexual conflicts for their own sexual and religious desires.

Specifically, they romanticized their prior religious experience. In so doing, they mobilized “emotional narratives” (Moon 2004) to define God’s house as the ultimate source of human fulfillment. As Micah explained during a party one evening: “There is nothing like Christian fellowship. You can feel the spirit of the Lord filling the space tonight the same way I felt it at Bible camp as a kid. I’ll tell you, those days at camp with God may have been the happiest of my childhood.” Paul agreed:

I remember when I was a kid the only times I really felt safe were when I was with God. I’m not downplaying the pain I felt in church, but somehow being in church overshadowed that pain because I felt like God’s special friend. I remember when I was not going to church I really felt like I was missing a piece of myself, and I was, you know, I was missing God’s presence and *nothing can replace that*.

Drawing upon dominant Christian discourses painting “happiness” as a byproduct of religion (Wilkins 2008), they depicted their early religious lives as their initial source of joy and explained their current religious participation as an effort to recapture that joy.

While all the Gay Christian men we studied offered romantic depictions of their early religious experience, some of their assertions of happiness revealed the struggle they faced during these years. As Tim explained:

I think the happiest place on earth for a child is church, but I also remember how hard it was to try to hide this other part of me that wasn’t welcome there. I feel like it was a learning experience because I got to experience the greatest joy one moment and the greatest shame the next second.

After offering the statement above during the party, Paul noted a similar inconsistency: “It’s funny, you know, because church was also the least safe place for me as I got older and developed crushes on other boys. I remember being so scared that they could tell, and would say something right in the middle of the service.” Even as they idealized early religious experiences, these Gay Christians have wrestled with the negative side of their pasts.

To combat these negative experiences and redirect them into a congruent moral path, they defined their struggles as the result of “lost” people rather than the feelings of God. Marcus’ comments one day over coffee offer a typical case:

What happened, I think, is that people got lost, you know, they got disconnected from God just like has happened at all times. They forgot that God was love, and let the fear of something different get into their hearts. For me, that's not God's fault, but the people. It's like when I was kid I remember scaring white people, or feeling like I did, because they didn't know what to do with black folks; I think it's the same thing and I think it hurt God even more than it hurt me, honestly.

Like Marcus, all the Gay Christian men we studied argued that their struggles arose from the failings of people rather than God, and further suggested such experiences saddened God. They created a parallel between their experiences and God's feelings while drawing distinctions between what people did and what role God played. As Derek explained in a conversation after worship one day: "I think you have to separate God's people and God. God's people can be jerks and it's understandable to be angry with them, but you can't let that anger bleed into your thoughts about God."

Seeking to keep anger from influencing their "thoughts about God," they directed their anger at other Christians and suggested that God would be proud of them if they forgave those who harmed them. As Peter explained in a meeting:

Of course I'm angry about my childhood, but I'm also grateful because I got to know God and I realized even as a kid, it wasn't God's fault that people couldn't see the truth. Like Jesus, I channel my anger into forgiving and educating other Christians so they can do what God wants us to do—love everyone like Jesus did. So in a way, the anger makes me a better Christian and helps me do God's work.

Later in the same meeting, Tommy further noted: "I think that is why so many gays never come back to God, they never figure out that God is not the source of their anger. *God is the solution to the pain other people have caused*, but for some that's tough to understand." The Gay Christians we studied made sense of their return to religion by excusing God for their negative emotions and directing the blame for such anger to other Christians who simply misunderstood God.

Spiritualizing Coming Out Processes

After rehearsing songs for an upcoming service, some Gay Christian men went out for coffee. As everyone got seated, Brian brought over a flyer about "Coming Out in College" he grabbed off the counter. Laughing, he said, "It's about time someone noticed *the importance of God*" as he pointed to the part of the pamphlet concerning religious issues with coming out. Taking a sip of his caramel macchiato, Barney said, "I think this is fantastic because we all know the most spiritual thing a person can do is come out. I mean, *it is a powerful testimony to God's plan that we even have the courage to be open.*" Nodding, Micah said, "Oh yeah, I don't think I would have ever come out without

God's help." Tommy added, "Yeah I'm willing to bet God got tired of hearing that same prayer so he just finally told us all to just do it." As everyone laughed, Peter noted, "It really is something you don't hear that much, but *I think God may be the force that compels people to come out in the first place.*" Others at the table nodded, and the conversation shifted to a new Evangelical church that just opened nearby.

Like many sexual minorities (Adams 2011), the Gay Christian men we studied all recalled coming out of the closet, and regularly shared stories about these events (Plummer 1995). At the same time, religion complicated their experiences, and all of them had left religion behind at one point or another. As a result, they sought to make sense of both departures in relation to their current sexual and religious identities. To do so, they spiritualized their coming out experiences—or granted these experiences spiritual meaning and significance—by constructing coming out as a directive from God and defining religious exiting (or leaving churches) as the only way to properly follow God. In so doing, they argued God played a primary role in their coming out experiences while always expecting them to return to active Christian practice later. As such, another characteristic of a Gay Christian moral career concerns spiritualizing coming out.

Our respondents granted coming out spiritual significance by emphasizing the role God played in sexual awakening. As Barney noted over dinner one night:

I don't know how I ever had the courage to tell people I was gay, I mean I know I didn't have that kind of courage. I prayed and prayed and prayed, and you know what, God answered and I just suddenly felt like I had to be out, I had to be honest about myself. It was like God needed me to do that for myself and maybe for other people I don't know. I just remember feeling like this thing inside me was God's gift and I had to express it or lose touch with God and that was terrifying for me, but *God had a plan the whole time.*

At a charity event, Michael agreed: "There is no way to explain it, and I'm sure it's so much harder for *those who haven't found God yet*, but I know that he gave me the power to be myself and without him in my life I couldn't have accepted *who I was created to be.*" Rather than a purely sexual or social experience, they interpreted their coming out experiences as by-products of God's power and presence in their lives.

They also defined coming out as a spiritual experience. Specifically, they suggested coming out brought them closer to God and granted them greater understanding of the benefits of religious faith. As Tommy noted in an interview:

I think the reason so many people come out of the closet only to find themselves feeling lost is due to a missing piece of the puzzle. *Coming out is not about this world, I don't think, but*

more like showing the self of your soul, the way God sees you. I think you get closer to God by being yourself, but I also think that many of the struggles gay people face come from God's absence in their lives. They don't really come out all the way because they don't feel the embrace waiting for them on the other side of the closet. That is God's embrace, and many people just don't realize that until much later.

Tim may have offered the most cogent expression of the spiritual aspect of coming out in a testimony he gave during a worship service:

Lost inside of closeted people, like we all once were, is God's loving embrace and the potential we all have to be like Jesus and serve as testaments to this world of the bliss awaiting in the next world. That is why coming out is so important—God needs us out and open so we can show the world His truth!

Like many Gay Christians (Rodriguez 2010), our respondents interpreted their religious and sexual identities as representations of God's love. In so doing, they defined coming out as a Christian act that would serve the world and bring them closer to God.

They also spiritualized their departure from religions. While such departures were ultimately temporary, they could have represented, as Adam noted one morning before worship, "ways that coming out took us away from God," which would have complimented their definitions of coming out. Instead, they defined these experiences as further examples of coming closer to God by arguing that churches had lost their way, and it was their Christian duty to leave the misguided behind in search of God (see also Sumerau 2013). Echoing LBT women's explanations for leaving religions (Wilcox 2009), they made sense of their own religious exiting by suggesting their former churches had lost touch with God's true teachings.

The most common way they spiritualized religious exiting involved defining antigay churches as out of touch with God. As Micah noted at a fellowship dinner:

I will never forget coming out of the closet and leaving my church in the same week. It was difficult, but I had to follow where God was leading me. I realized, though it took some prayer, that a God of love and hope would not be welcome in a place where people hated any of his children, and since I was sure God wanted me to come out, I just had to find where God's love was alive and that was not the churches I had been to.

Barney expressed a similar divine inclination to leave his childhood church: "It started to feel so hypocritical when they said Jesus is love and then said I was hated—I mean, come on man. And so I prayed about it, and I felt like God wanted me to find, or maybe even make something more God-like." While scholars have noted Gay Christian tendencies to cite pain experienced in churches as their reason for departure while attempting to integrate their sexual and religious identities (Rodriguez 2010), our respondents appeared to develop

other reasons after a few years⁴ of living as openly Gay Christians (see also Wilcox 2009). It may be the case that over time Gay Christians' reasons for religious departures may shift in relation to their respective levels of identity integration or the extent of time spent as active religious sexual minorities.

Sexualizing Coming Back into Religion

Standing outside the church smoking cigarettes with two members after a Board of Directors meeting early in the first author's fieldwork, Tommy walked up and said, "So it looks like we may have a new member soon. Russell called last night asking for spiritual guidance." Chuckling, Peter asked, "So did he finally find God in the back of some [college] student's head?" Everyone started laughing except the first author who asked, "What does that mean?" Patting the first author on the back, Gabriel said, "Don't know why, but it just seems like gays come back to church—like Russell's been away from churches for a decade and I was gone for like fifteen years—right after we get laid." Putting out his cigarette, Toby said, "Yeah it's almost like God speaks to gay people through assholes," which elicited a round of laughter punctuated by Tommy adding, "Yeah Paul got blinded so he could see God, but we just have to get laid."

While moments like the one above surprised the first author early in fieldwork, it became apparent the combination of sexual activity and coming back to churches was a common refrain among these Gay Christian men. In fact, this theme also regularly came up in the occasions where lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members talked about coming back to religion. Similar to the ways they spiritualized the most important sexual experiences many sexual minorities have (see Adams 2011), they sexualized their spiritual transitions. They often suggested their sexual activity led them back to active religious practice. In so doing, they integrated God's presence into their sexual lives in ways that suggested God was not only okay with, but also at times even present during same-sex sexual activities. Although previous LGBT Christian studies rarely mention sexual activity explicitly, the first author learned repeatedly from respondents that this might be a major oversight. For the Gay Christian men at the heart of this study, telling "sexual stories" (Plummer 1995) represented another aspect of their moral career wherein they integrated God into their lives to explain their return to religion.

The Gay Christians we studied sexualized their return to religious practice in three ways. In some cases, as suggested in the illustration above, they recounted epiphanies or "turning points" (Goffman 1961) wherein God spoke to them in the midst of sexual activity. In such cases, the presence of God during their sexual activities compelled them to rededicate themselves to religion. As Peter noted in an interview:

You're going to laugh, but I have to tell you I found God in the glory hole. I know that sounds crazy, but I was in the glory hole and I had this feeling of peace wash over me, but the feeling was followed by a sense that this wasn't where I belonged. I didn't understand what was happening at first, but I told the guy I was with goodbye, and I stumbled outside as the sun was coming up, and right there in front of me was a poster for a special event at a local church. I remember knowing in that moment that I had to go back to church, I just had to. I mean, God had come all the way out to the glory hole to collect me.

Micah offered a similar story while talking to a new member one morning: "I was sweaty as hell, I remember that, and I was with this guy I liked a lot, and suddenly all I could think about were Bible verses, which wasn't exactly a turn on, but I just started wondering when the last time I went to church was." In fact, Russell apparently did find God in the back of a [college] student's head: "I was with this college kid and it was normal and good you know. Anyhow, I looked up mid-thrust, and there is this big cross on the wall I hadn't noticed before, and that was it, it was time to go back to church." In such cases, the experience of another man's body led to a turning point wherein Gay Christians felt the pull to return to active religious practice.

While the above situations were positive sexual experiences, negative sexual experiences also led Gay Christians back to the church. As Michael noted during a party:

I have never prayed so hard in my life as I did the night—the one night I tell you because I'm not normally like that—I had a one-night stand and the condom burst. Oh my God, I was terrified, and I started shaking from head to toe, and he just kept going, but all I could do was pray and pray and pray. I made up my mind around the time he finished; I needed to get back to God and quick.

After a choir practice, Barney recalled how a bad night reminded him he needed church:

I was in one of the bookstores, you know the bookstores I'm talking about, and I was handling my business, but when I left I just felt empty, and I could almost hear a voice in my head saying you know you were meant for more than this and so on the way home I stopped by a church for the first time in forever.

The same way positive experiences with sexual activity led some Gay Christians to seek out church homes, negative experiences often led them to feel like something was missing in their lives. At such times, they sought to fill the void by re-entering religion.

While the aforementioned situations present opposite ends of a spectrum, Gay Christian men also sexualized their return to church by defining this transition as a middle ground between positive and negative experiences. As Marty noted over coffee one morning: "I think I really came back to church because I wanted to find a husband. I spent so many years fooling around, and I think I

just wanted something more than a good or bad night, you know, like a life with someone special and moral.” Similarly, Marcus recalled: “Oh man when I came out I was wild, like porn star wild, but over time I wanted more of a relationship you know, and I felt like if I was going to love someone *they needed the kind of moral value only God can bring.*” Whereas some had bad nights and others had good nights, still others returned to churches in search of life partnerships they believed were more likely to be found among other Christian people in churches.

Conclusion

The Gay Christian men we studied all experienced sexual and religious transitions. Like other marginalized communities (Mason-Schrock 1996), they sought to make sense of their prior experiences in relation to their current identity claims. To accomplish this goal, they outlined a moral career that suggested they were always destined to become openly Gay Christian people. In so doing, they essentialized their religious belief and practice, emotionalized early religious experience, spiritualized coming out of the closet and churches, and sexualized their return to churches.

While their elaboration of a Gay Christian moral career integrated their sexual and religious lives, it also reproduced cultural patterns that facilitate the subordination of non-religious people. By essentializing religious belief and practice, for example, they reproduced societal assertions that all people are inherently created by and thus tied to supernatural beings and that those who reject these ideologies are simply lost or misguided (Hammer et al. 2012). Similarly, their construction of “good people” as inherently and necessarily religious reproduced American legal (Heath 2012), interpersonal (Barton 2012), and ideological (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006) discourses that define non-religious people as devalued “others” while crediting religion with sole authority over morality. Whereas researchers have recently begun explicating the meaning and operation of religious privilege in America (Hammer et al. 2012), our findings suggest part of the answer to these questions may lie in the ways people explain their transitions into and out of religions and the ways people define religion within their lives.

These findings also support existing LGBT Christian scholarship (see, e.g., Rodriguez 2010; Wilcox 2003; Wolkomir 2006) and extend this literature by outlining elements of a Gay Christian moral career. Whereas such scholarship has primarily focused on strategies of sexual and religious identity integration, our analysis reveals the usefulness of conceptualizing LGBT Christian experience as a moral career wherein Christian sexual minorities utilize the symbolic resources at their disposal to integrate their sexual and religious experiences in support of their integrated LGBT Christian identities. Considering that elements

of each of the stages we outline are implied in previous LGBT Christian studies, it may be the case that a moral career framework could provide an opportunity for unifying the past 25 years of scholarship in this area, and further elaborating similarities and differences in contemporary LGBT religious experience. As “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1969), the processes of moral career construction we outline may guide future LGBT religious scholarship beyond strategies of identity integration in hopes of capturing the totality of sexual–religious experience.

These findings also complicate previous treatments of sexual–religious experience by examining the sexual activities of religious sexual minorities. While previous studies have typically only referenced sexualities in relation to identity claims or experiences of shame, guilt, and fear, our analysis reveals some ways religious sexual minorities may interpret their sexual activities in ways that bolster their claims to religious identities, facilitate their re-immersion into religion, and define the role (active, passive, or otherwise) of deities in their religious *and sexual* lives. While elaborating the sexual side of Gay—and other LBT—Christian experience requires information beyond the scope of this study, our findings suggest there may be much to learn from the “sexual stories” (Plummer 1995) of religious sexual minorities as well as the comparison of these narratives to the religious stories that represent the bulk of existing knowledge about religious sexual minorities.

Our results also extend previous treatments of religious entrance and exiting among sexual minorities. Whereas Wilcox (2009) focused on the departures of LBT women from organized religion and some sociologists have explored processes of religious conversion (Ponticelli 1999), our analysis reveals similar nuances in the trajectories of religious sexual minorities seeking to remain religious. On the one hand, one could say our respondents left religion behind for a time in their lives before ultimately returning to active practice. On the other hand, one could say our respondents never left religion because they did not stop believing, and thus, they merely converted from active members of Christian churches to inactive believers outside of churches and finally to active believers in new churches. In either case, our analysis reveals the complexity of religious entrance and exiting and suggests there may be much to learn from the ways religious sexual minorities make sense of such transitions.

Our findings also complement recent articulations of religious privilege in America (see also Barton 2012; Harris 2014; Sumerau 2014 for discussions of variations in religious power and privilege in contemporary social relations). Whereas previous studies have demonstrated the existence of such privilege, our analysis reveals some ways people may reproduce religious privilege in their daily lives whether or not they realize they are doing so. Unraveling the multitude of ways people may reproduce and/or challenge religious privilege,

however, requires asking questions beyond the present study. Researchers could, for example, examine how religious and non-religious people essentialize or de-essentialize religious belief and practice in their face-to-face interactions. Further, researchers could examine what role the search for valuable selves (see Schwalbe et al. 2000) plays in the reproduction or challenge of religious inequalities. Finally, researchers should explore the ways race, class, gender, and sexualities may shape people's experience of religious privilege. In so doing, sociologists could begin—as they have done with other systems of inequality—to take seriously the symbolic elevation of religion in America.

ENDNOTES

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¹All names contained herein are pseudonyms.

²All italicized passages demonstrate situations wherein respondents essentialized religion, which we discuss in full in the first section of the analysis.

³For readers unfamiliar with Transgender and Non-binary populations, “ze” is a gender neutral pronoun used to refer to people who do not identify as cisgender women or men. The same way she may run or he may run, ze may also run. For more information on such terminology, see Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers (2015).

⁴On average, most of our respondents had been openly gay and Christian for over 5 years.

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