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MOBILIZING RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER DISCOURSES IN A METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Abstract: Drawing on principles of intersectionality, I explore how members of a southeastern Metropolitan Community Church use race, class, and gender discourses to construct and signify moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. Based on fourteen months of fieldwork, I demonstrate how members mobilized discourses emphasizing the incorporation of racial diversity, the minimization of class distinctions, and the equalization of gender categories within the church to signify their own moral worth. Moreover, I show how members anchored these discourses in the authority of Biblical scripture, which allowed them to claim moral standing within the larger Christian tradition while minimizing the tension between their sexual and religious identity claims. In conclusion, I draw out two central implications of this work: (1) how race, class, and gender discourses may provide symbolic resources for integrating sexual and religious identities and locally constructing sexual and religious morality; and (2) the importance of intersectional analyses for assessing LGBT religious experience.

Keywords: intersectionality; LGBT Christians; sexualities; moral identities

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Researchers convincingly demonstrate that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Christians encounter significant conflict, both social and personal, when attempting to integrate their religious and sexual identities (Gray & Thumma, 1997; McQueeney, 2009; Moon, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Wilcox, 2003; Wolkomir, 2006). The implications of these studies include that LGBT Christians draw upon the “cultural toolkits” (Swidler, 1986) of Christian and LGBT culture to develop particular strategies for maintaining moral identities as Christian sexual minorities (Gray & Thumma, 1997; McQueeney, 2009; Wolkomir, 2006), and collectively construct “safe spaces” for the interactional processes of ideological, identity, and emotion work necessary for integrating disparate sexual and religious identity claims (Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000; Thumma & Gray, 2005; Wolkomir, 2006). Building on these insights, I adopt an intersectional approach (Collins, 2000) to examine how members of a southeastern Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) mobilized race, class, and gender discourses to construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND MORAL IDENTITIES

Intersectional theorists convincingly demonstrate that we all occupy multiple social positions within interlocking systems of power (Collins, 1986; 1989; 1998; 2000). These systems shape our life experiences, and the groups we choose to join. The intersections between these systems are thus central to our conceptions of ourselves and how others see us (Deeb-Sossa, 2007; Eastman and Schrock, 2008). While we may claim any social position or identity we choose, our positions within interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and sexual oppression exert considerable pressure upon our selections (Collins, 2000; Eastman & Schrock, 2008; McQueeney, 2009). If we claim an identity contradictory to our positions within any of these systems, for example, we risk facing ridicule, discrimination, and even exclusion from others claiming similar status (McQueeney, 2009). Thus, successfully claiming an identity requires us to align it with our race, class, gender, and sexual identities (Deeb-Sossa, 2007; McQueeney, 2009). In turn, we may draw upon these identities to establish our right to other favorable positions (Eastman & Schrock, 2008; McQueeney, 2009). Although such identity work is by definition selective and limited, sometimes our locations within interlocking systems of oppression provide resources for constructing positive images of ourselves (Deeb-Sossa, 2007). Managing multiple identity claims, however, can lead to tension between our conflicting positions within interlocking systems of oppression and privilege (Deeb-Sossa, 2007; McQueeney, 2009).

Wanting to believe we are good people and that others see us as such

often leads us to create identities that testify to our character, worth, and value; that is, we claim a moral identity (Deeb-Sossa, 2007; Holden, 1997; Kleinman, 1996). Often this task is accomplished by working collectively with others to create the signs, codes, rites of affirmation and boundaries that signify to others and ourselves what type of people we are (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). The cooperation of others in such “identity work” reinforces our claims to a desired identity while deepening our attachment to its meaning in our lives (Holden, 1997; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996). But when we claim a moral identity that stands in opposition to our positions within interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and sexual domination, this claim can become fraught with tension (Gray & Thumma, 1997; Holden, 1997; McQueeney, 2009; Wolkomir, 2006). In response to such tension, we may mobilize discourses drawn from collective conceptions of race, class, gender, and sexuality to bolster our claims of moral worth and mitigate the tension between conflicting social positions.

In this paper, I analyze how members of a southeastern MCC used discourses of race, class, and gender inclusivity to resist heterosexist conceptions of Christian morality, and construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. Specifically, members mobilized discourses emphasizing the incorporation of racial diversity, the minimization of class distinctions, and the equalization of gender categories within the church to symbolize their own moral worth. Moreover, they anchored these discourses in the authority of Biblical scripture, which allowed them to claim moral standing rooted in the larger Christian tradition (See Ammerman, 1997; McRoberts, 2003). Importantly, their use of race, class, and gender discourses allowed them to claim LGBT Christian identities while minimizing the tension between their positions within interlocking systems of sexual and religious authority.

SEXUAL AND CHRISTIAN DISCOURSES

The congregation of interest is a member of the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), which arose in response to the marginalization of LGBT people within mainstream Christian traditions. The UFMCC is an international denomination committed to the promotion of an inclusive Christian discourse based on “the inherent value of each individual regardless of sexual orientation, gender, gender identification, race, class, age, or abilities (UFMCC, 2009). Despite being considered a mainline denominational structure for all practical purposes (McQueeney, 2009), the UFMCC promotes a Christ centered, nonsexist, nonheterosexist theology standing in stark contrast to prevailing Christian definitions of LGBT people as sinners and deviants (Moon, 2004; Gray & Thumma, 1997; Wolkomir, 2006). As such, UFMCC congregations promote an alternative moral discourse while operating on the margins of contemporary Christian culture.

While LGBT Christians cannot avoid their marginal status within

mainstream Christianity, they may interpret this position as indicative of moral worth (See Thumma & Gray, 2005; Wolkomir, 2006). Believing they suffer unfairly due to human injustice as racial groups, lower classes, and women have before them (Moon, 2004) allows members to define their marginal status as evidence of their own Christian value (Wolkomir, 2006). Similar to the gay Christians Wolkomir (2006) observed, members of an MCC may learn to interpret their own personal struggles as the product of “others” misinterpreting the message of God’s eternal truth. However, this strategy may be easier when confronting the marginalization of social groups due to race, class, and gender issues explicitly addressed in the Bible rather than focusing directly on the issue of sexual morality (See Moon, 2004; Wolkomir, 2006). One reason for this derives from the authority granted to scripture by Christians as a whole (McQueeney, 2009; Wolkomir, 2006). Another important reason concerns prevailing Christian discourses surrounding sexual morality.

Prevailing Christian discourses define LGBT individuals as abominations, sinners, and heretics in the eyes of God (McQueeney, 2009; Thumma & Gray, 2005; Wolkomir, 2006). According to these definitions, claiming an LGBT identity violates scriptural interpretations of sexual morality (Gray & Thumma, 1997; McQueeney, 2009; Moon, 2004; Thumma & Gray, 2005). Moreover, some evangelical and mainstream groups malign LGBT Christians for failing to participate in the primary expression of God’s will on earth, heterosexual marriage (McQueeney, 2009; Wolkomir, 2006). These discourses also provide support for acts of banishment, discrimination, and judgment directed at Christians who openly claim an LGBT identity (Gray & Thumma, 1997; McQueeney, 2009; Wolkomir, 2006). Even within churches adopting official open and affirming policies, LGBT people may become second-class members of the church lacking the legitimacy of “normal” believers (McQueeney, 2009; Moon, 2004). In sum, LGBT Christians must draw upon the “cultural toolkits” (Swidler, 1986) available to them to negotiate moral identities as Christian sexual minorities within a context where their sexual and religious identity claims stand in stark contrast.

Rather than attacking prevailing Christian discourses directly, the LGBT Christians in this study mobilized discourses that emphasized the inclusion of racial, classed, and gendered groups traditionally marginalized by Christian authorities (See Daly, 1975; Moon, 2004; Smith, 1991). These discourses emphasized providing affirmation for marginalized social groups while anchoring this provision in concrete scriptural examples (See also Wolkomir, 2006). Doing so also allowed the members to frame their own marginalization as the latest episode of a long running program of Biblical misuse and human injustice (McQueeney, 2009; Moon, 2004; Smith, 1991). Strategically promoting race, class, and gender discourses both aligned LGBT people with historic movements based in liberating Christianity from the clutches of injustice (See Smith, 1991), and bolstered members’ positive identity claims by providing evidence that they were better Christians than their

exclusive counterparts (McQueeney, 2009). Members' mobilization of race, class, and gender discourses thus provided mechanisms for crafting a collective moral discourse anchored in the history and scripture of traditional Christianity (See also Lee, 2004).

Drawing on the race, class, and gender characteristics of the congregation, members used the ritual performance of sermons to craft their moral discourse. As researchers have consistently demonstrated, the regular performance of worship rituals, and sermons in particular, provides opportunities for crafting collective narratives, identities, and meanings capable of bonding members to the whole and providing resources for navigating both interpersonal and ecological conflicts (Ammerman, 1997; Becker, 1998; Lee, 2004; McRoberts, 2003; Moon, 2004; Marti, 2008; 2009). Becker (1998), for example, found that congregations facing internal and external conflict solidify membership bonds by ritualizing the shared experience of the membership. Moreover, Lee's (2004) found that the performance of sermons provided the resources necessary for challenging gender inequalities within African-American churches (See also McRoberts, 2003). Sermons thus provided members with a vehicle for locally constructing and mobilizing a collective moral discourse capable of transcending conflicts both inside and outside the walls of the local church.

Overall, LGBT Christians' moral discourse arose within the context of social tensions between religious and sexual identities (Gray & Thumma, 1997; McQueeney, 2009; Moon, 2004; Wolkomir, 2006). As I will show, members negotiated this tension by defining the inclusion of groups marginalized due to race, class, and gender characteristics as a calling anchored in Christian scriptures. At the same time, their strategic use of these race, class, and gender discourses allowed them to signify and affirm their own moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. Further, their use of the pulpit may have also provided a primer for or a supplement to the processes of ideological revision necessary for the successful and sustainable integration of their sexual and religious identities (see Wolkomir, 2006). Members thus used weekly sermons to resist heterosexist conceptions of Christian morality and construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities.

SETTING AND METHOD

My involvement with Shepherd Church (all names contained herein are pseudonyms) began when I read their advertisement in the local LGBT newsletter. When I contacted the office expressing my research interests, a man named Tommy informed me that since they were without a pastor and still in the process of adjusting to running their own church, I would need to propose my research interests to the collective in order to obtain access. At their next board meeting, I presented the twenty-seven members present with a proposal for my

study, professional references, and some articles I wrote while working as a journalist. Moreover, I explained to those assembled that my own experience as a bisexual orphaned by a homosexual male raised by a working-class, conservative, Baptist family in South Carolina had led to my interest in the intersection of religion and sexuality. Two weeks later Tommy informed me that I had been given approval to study the church before telling me that he thought I “would have plenty of information and opportunities to observe, I mean we try to be inclusive here, you know, so you’ll be welcome at any event we have.”

Over the next fourteen months, I observed and participated in morning (20), evening (20), and special joint (5) worship services at Shepherd Church. I usually spent about three hours with members during every visit talking about whatever topics arose or conducting informal interviews before and after the official services. During this time, I tape-recorded every service, and took shorthand notes in a leather bound journal whenever possible. Following each activity, I composed detailed field notes from memory and transcribed each audio recording in full.

Since members tended to only attend one service or the other, I decided to attend each service equally while taking special care to be present at every joint occasion. Morning services were typically composed of about twenty-five to fifty attendees practicing a conservative, reserved style of worship including traditional hymns, recitations, and formal sermons delivered by members or guest speakers. In contrast, evening services generally consisted of between forty-five and eighty participants practicing a revival or emotional style of worship including contemporary musical performances and personal testimonies delivered by the membership. Joint services usually celebrated special occasions with a mixture of the two worship styles.

Based on self-reports, congregational logs and tithing reports, there were about eighty members (40 women, 39 men, and 1 transgendered) active in the church during this time. These individuals were mostly white (68) and middle class (60), but there were about 12 non-white (8 African-American and 4 Hispanic), 10 lower class, and 10 upper class members as well. Educational attainment within the church varied from high school dropouts (7) to members holding graduate degrees (11), but the majority of members ended their educational careers with either high school diplomas (28) or bachelor’s degrees (34). Most members identified as lesbian or gay (75), though there were 5 members who identified as bisexual (3) or heterosexual (2). They ranged in age from early teens to mid-seventies, though the majority were in their 30’s and 40’s. Most members grew up attending traditional Protestant or Catholic churches, but felt excluded when they came to terms with their sexuality at a later age (See Wolkomir, 2006).

Similar to congregants of other churches characterized by

heterogeneous memberships, members of Shepherd Church generally transcended interpersonal and external conflicts by emphasizing the shared characteristics, experiences, and participation of the whole throughout formal rituals (Ammerman, 1997; Becker, 1998; Marti, 2008; 2009). Conflicts primarily emerged due to the lack of an institutionalized pastorate, interpersonal differences between the morning and evening services, and the absence of an active LGBT presence in the larger community. In the face of these challenges, members stressed the importance of solidarity and an active presence both inside and outside the church. Throughout my field work, congregational members organized to plan and participate in fourteen community outreach events, which included participating in charitable dinners for low-income groups, a community aids walk, a transgender day of remembrance, interfaith ministries with pagan, African-American Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and LGBT Affirming religious groups in the area, a domestic violence caucus, spiritual and social Pride Week events, and the formation of the first chapter of PFLAG in the area. In sum, members of the congregation developed a community emphasizing the merits of diversity within the church, and extended this conception by organizing church-based activism throughout the larger community (See McRoberts, 2003).

My analysis focuses on thirty-five sermons, or “performances” as members playfully referred to them, delivered by members of the church (22), visiting pastors affiliated with other LGBT affirming churches in the region (5), and a newly installed interim pastor (8) during the first fourteen months of a multiple-year ethnographic study of Shepherd Church (for practices within the church during this time period see Sumerau & Schrock, 2011 and for the transformation of the church following this time period see Sumerau, 2012). In order to understand how intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality configured the religious lives and religious messages of the group, I examined both the content of the sermons and the differential social locations of the speakers delivering each sermon. Drawing on personal observations and self-reports, I ascertained the race, class, gender, and sexual characteristics of each speaker (Table 1 shows demographic characteristics for the 26 different speakers in this study), and compared sermons given by members of each group. I determined the class position of each speaker, for example, by ascertaining the economic, educational, and employment status of each member. Specifically, I defined members holding manual labor, temporary, or no jobs at the time of the study as lower class, members holding white collar, government, business, or managerial positions as middle class, and members holding professional positions (e.g. lawyer, doctor, professor, and pastor) as upper class. In so doing, I analyzed how speakers’ positions within race, class, gender, and sexual systems of oppression and privilege shaped their efforts to resist heterosexist conceptions of Christian morality during the weekly performance of sermons.

My analysis developed in an inductive fashion. Throughout the study, I wrote notes on notes (Kleinman & Copp, 1993) through which I developed emerging themes and developed categories for further investigation. As data

collection and analysis continued, the significance of congregational diversity repeatedly emerged. Drawing on elements of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), I went back through the transcripts treating each sermon as a distinct “performance,” and coding the use of Biblical stories, the interpretation of Biblical passages, and reflections upon the stories and passages by those who delivered them. I then categorized these codes in terms of the speakers’ social identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and religious tradition while paying close attention to how these themes intersected throughout the set of transcripts. The combination of these procedures allowed me to gain insight into how the mobilization of race, class, and gender discourses grounded in concrete scriptural examples provided resources for defining the label “LGBT Christian” as a moral identity.

Table 1: *Socio-demographic Characteristics of Speakers*

Characteristic	Attribute	Number
Race / Ethnicity	African-American	5
	Latino	2
	White	19
Economic Class	Lower Class	5
	Middle Class	16
	Upper Class	5
Sexuality / Gender	Lesbian Women	15
	Gay Men	11

MOBILIZING RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER DISCOURSES

What follows is an analysis of how members of Shepherd Church mobilized discourses of race, class, and gender inclusivity to resist heterosexist conceptions of Christian morality and construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. Through the performance of sermons, members defined the incorporation of racial diversity, the minimization of class distinctions, and the equalization of gender categories within the church as evidence of their own moral worth. Further, members claimed moral standing within the larger Christian tradition by anchoring these claims in Biblical authority, affiliating with groups marginalized due to race, class, and gender inequality, and distancing themselves from inequitable practices embedded in secular and Christian culture. As such, members navigated the intersection of their conflicting sexual and religious identity claims by drawing upon the resources provided by the race, class, and gender characteristics of the group.

Incorporating Racial Diversity

Lower class members—white, black, and Hispanic lesbian women and gay men—mobilized discourses of racial incorporation to construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. During sermons, these members framed the incorporation of racial diversity within the church as evidence of their moral value while implying that moral Christians must oppose racial divisions. Generally, they did this by anchoring racial incorporation in scriptural examples, aligning themselves with racial minorities, and distancing themselves from racial divisions embedded within traditional Christianity (See Emerson and Smith 2000).

Lower class members anchored discourses of racial incorporation in the authority of the Bible. They often focused on instances where Jesus reached out to racial minorities. Moreover, they defined crossing racial lines as a moral effort assigned to all Christians. A typical example arose in the depiction of Jesus offered by a white, lower class, gay man named Miles:

The scripture says that Jesus was on his way and had to go through this area known as Samaria. So this was the borderland and the region that was arbitrarily divided between the people of Samaria and the people of Jerusalem and Galilee, and if you remember the cultural stories about all that, the people of Samaria and the Jewish people did not get along, and yet they had so much in common, that they had put on each other differences and boundaries, which I think is a lesson for us, to think about the boundaries that we put between each other, and all the oppression and things we would like to see changed. So we see Jesus in this situation representative of a boundary breaker of sorts trying to push the boundaries away so that there is more unity, so that there is more of the spirit of love among different races divided despite their similarities at this point.

In other instances, lower class members emphasized scriptural passages where racial minorities serve as moral examples for all. In so doing, they argued that members of marginalized racial groups might be better Christians than members of dominant groups. A typical example can be seen in a sermon offered by a white, lower class, lesbian woman named Shirley:

What about this idea that the one in ten that came back was the Samaritan, he was an outcast of outcasts, there is pretty common belief among the Jewish scholars and the rabbis that the other nine in the story were probably Jewish, and yet it was this foreigner from a “lesser” race, this Samaritan as Jesus says, that came back. What was the difference between the one and the nine, what do you think? Most people would say that he came back to say he was thankful, well does that mean that the other nine weren’t healed; I think really all ten were healed. It says

to me that there is perhaps a difference between being healed and being made whole. It says to me that those excluded or outside the mainstream sometimes understand the value of connecting better than others, and we might all do better if we remember that.

In each of these examples, lower class members anchored the incorporation of racial diversity in the authority of scriptures by emphasizing both the value in reaching across racial barriers, and the benefits of incorporating diverse racial perspectives within the church.

Lower class members also aligned their experiences as sexual minorities with those of racial minority groups. As such, they often emphasized the similarity of mainstream conceptions of marginalized groups and the shared struggle against these stereotypes. A typical illustration can be seen in a sermon delivered by a Hispanic, lower class, lesbian woman named Sandy:

Let us not forget the day where everybody in Jerusalem heard the word of the Lord in the language they grew up with, and let us not forget that God was saying I will meet you where you are my children of all nations, races, and backgrounds. I myself was reminded of this moment when I watched the news the other day. I found myself thinking about the struggles of African-Americans and LGBT people in this country, and the vicious attacks each group has faced for so long. I was thinking about these things as an African-American President was sworn into office and as an LGBT member of the Christian clergy played a major role in this moment in history. Think about what older generations would say about today, I want you all to think about that, and together we must not let moments like this pass without notice, we have to celebrate the success stories and remember the perils we face together because together we struggle and together we shall continue, it is that desire, that common spirit of effort that binds us and makes all the difference and makes the successes so much more important when they come. Let us remember that on that day in Jerusalem and on that day in America and on every other day, our struggles are intertwined and together we can move forward as one.

In sermons like this, lower class members aligned the experiences of sexual and racial minorities by emphasizing the shared struggles and celebrating the individual and collective victories of each group.

Lower class members also distanced themselves from racial divisions embedded in mainstream Christianity. They generally argued that racial divisions were the result of misguided and immoral human prejudice, and contrary to the will of God. As a white, lower class, lesbian woman named Sandra explained:

See we can't let the surface lead us astray, remember when the man in the Bible didn't want to swim in some dirty Jewish river, but in that river lied a cure Elijah tells us. Some people will let differences overtake their need for a cure, but we are called to be better than that, we are called to reach across the lines others have drawn, yes other churches draw them too, but we cannot be misguided by others, even those claiming to be church people, if we seek to make this world better for all. We have to take responsibility and look to the actions of people and ourselves, are we following the guidelines of God or just doing church business as usual is an important question for each of us.

An African-American, lower class, gay man named Marcus expressed similar concerns when discussing segregation in contemporary churches,

See people still haven't learned, but its one of the earliest lessons in the Bible. We can't understand other groups without spending time with them, and if we choose not to understand groups we risk harming them and ourselves. Remember the day the Lord rose up and brought down the Pharaoh. Enslaving a race of people and defying their heritage brought the Egyptians a powerful flood of wrath, and God surely has the same in store for others who attempt to hold down one race for the benefit of another. But what we forget is that by staying separated we continue to hold each other, all of us really in some ways, down because it is together that we can truly reach beyond the struggles of today.

In illustrations like these, lower class members distanced themselves from the racial divisions prevalent in contemporary Christianity by defining these divisions as misguided and immoral affronts to true Christian morality.

Overall, lower class white, African-American, and Hispanic lesbian women and gay men mobilized discourses of racial incorporation to construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. By anchoring racial incorporation in scriptural examples, aligning themselves with racial minority groups, and distancing themselves from racial divisions within mainstream Christian culture, these members used the performance of sermons to define the incorporation of racial diversity within the church as evidence of their moral worth. Moreover, they defined opposition to racial division as a central component of true Christian morality.

Minimizing Class Distinction

Whereas lower class members often emphasized racial incorporation, middle class members generally emphasized class solidarity in their sermons. Specifically, middle class speakers emphasized minimizing class distinctions within the church to construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities.

These members defined the minimization of class distinctions within the church as evidence of their moral value while implying that moral Christians actively oppose economic disparities. They did this by anchoring discourses of solidarity in scriptural examples, committing to work for those marginalized due to economic status, and distancing themselves from materialism (See Smith, 1991).

Middle class members anchored discourses of class solidarity in the authority of the Bible. These sermons often focused on instances where Christians are taught to look beyond earthly riches and desires in search of deeper connection. As such, speakers typically defined economic disparities and earthly class distinctions as obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of a Christian life. A typical illustration can be found in a white, middle class, gay man named David's discussion of Jesus and the prodigal son:

Jesus says that the father explains that we must take comfort and enjoy those that are with us, those that go through this life with us. We have no need to let earthly desires and divisions cloud our hearts, the beauty of life rests in bringing people together in a spirit of love and service instead of the selfish desires of competition and consumption. So we see that the abundance of God's love isn't something limited or directed at particular groups, but its something in each of us no matter our standing or background, something we need to seek in the reflections of others, something we get from coming together in the spirit of love and sharing and service to each other, but its also something that the distinctions of our current culture try to hide from our sight, God wants us to see past these distinctions and reach out to each other in the spirit of love and togetherness.

Similarly, middle class members often emphasized instances where Biblical figures had to leave behind their social status and economic privilege in order to serve God. In so doing, they defined fighting for the lower classes as a calling dictated by the word of God. An African-American, middle class, lesbian woman named Nina offered a typical example one morning:

We must never forget that the oppression of the poor often led to some of the more powerful revolutions in the Bible. Whether we look at Moses leaving the harsh ways of royalty to fight for the people or Paul forsaking his power within the traditional religious authority to preach for the people, we are called to step beyond the status system of our current culture. We are called to be uniters in the world, and this call is for all of us in all our individual situations, it is a call of the whole community of believers. Like Jesus we must reach out to those separated and pushed down by those in power. We must stand with all those who cannot stand alone.

In sermons like this, middle class members anchored solidarity in the authority

of scriptures by emphasizing looking beyond earthly class distinctions and fighting for those who suffer as a result of economic disparities.

Middle class members also committed to working for those marginalized due to economic disparities. They often emphasized being active in the community as a collective force for the needs of others. People entering the church typically found a collection of tubs, baskets, and boxes labeled with various charitable causes in the back of the sanctuary each week, and these collections often came up during sermons delivered by middle class members. A typical example arose when a white, middle class, lesbian woman named Dana discussed the church's recent participation in a local neighborhood in the city:

It was wonderful and I would like to thank each of you that helped us feed people down in Neighborhood yesterday afternoon. We will be going again later this year, but between now and then we are collecting in the back for the families in that area. For those who don't know these are people who are struggling with things that some of us take for granted, and it reminds me of Jesus feeding the multitudes because even today there are those working hard with little to show for it and there are times when things are just short especially for some of the single-parent families we met this weekend. We have to do what we can to help out because these people are just like us. They work hard, they struggle against difficult circumstances, and we all know what that's like on at least one level, and they are pushing forward but we can push with them and hopefully provide some help in the hard times. I would say that each of us should remember a time when we felt sad or tired or whatever and wished someone was there, this is a time for us to be there to help other people who need to feel the loving spirit in their lives.

During sermons like this, middle class members used the pulpit to express commitment to efforts for those marginalized due to economic disparities, and defined these efforts as a moral mandate for all members of the church.

Middle class members also distanced themselves from the materialism of mainstream culture. In these sermons, they typically emphasized the ability of all people to contribute to the operations of the church and the will of God regardless of their financial status in the world at large. A typical example occurred when a white, middle class, gay man named Bob explained the term moral service one Sunday evening:

No matter your place, your circumstance, your worth in this world, there is a place for you in the service of God. Some can give their money, but others can offer just as much in the use of their time and talents to help others in our community. Don't let the beliefs of our

culture, beliefs rooted in instant gratification and consumption darken your door. Come forth with the gifts you have and together we can reach beyond the values of this world. I know some of us have been in those churches, you know the ones, where each week is about how much money you can give or some new project being built, but those churches have been misled by our current culture. The work of God, the project for us, is the building of community and the sharing of abundance with each other, that is the gift of the Christian life.

In sermons like this, middle class members established work within the community and active participation regardless of economic situation or class distinction as evidence of moral worth, and defined materialism and economic disparities as incongruent with true Christian morality.

Overall, middle class, white and African-American, lesbian women and gay men mobilized a discourse of class solidarity to construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. By anchoring discourses of class solidarity in scriptural examples, committing themselves to work for those marginalized due to economic disparities, and distancing themselves from the materialism of mainstream culture, middle class members defined the minimization of class distinctions within their church as evidence of moral worth. Further, they defined opposition to economic disparities as a central component of true Christian morality.

Equalizing Gender Categories

Whereas lower class members emphasized racial inclusivity and middle class members stressed class solidarity, upper class, white and African-American, gay men and lesbian women generally mobilized discourses of gender equality to construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. These members defined the equalization of gender categories within the church as evidence of their moral value while implying that moral Christians actively oppose gender inequality. They did this by anchoring gender equality in scriptural examples, emphasizing the importance of women in the leadership and operation of the church, and distancing themselves from the gender inequality embedded in traditional Christianity (See Adams, 2007; Daly, 1975).

Upper class members anchored discourses of gender equality in the authority of the Bible. They often focused on instances where Jesus called on women to be leaders in Christian ministry. A typical illustration occurred when a white, upper class, gay man named Allen spoke of Mary Magdalene finding the tomb empty during the Easter sunrise service:

Mary comes alone to find Jesus and does not see him. She thinks he is a gardener. God was the first gardener, and Jesus becomes the gardener growing the fruits of salvation. Mary was right actually. Jesus tills the

soil of our hearts, makes us fruitful, and restores us to paradise. Everything changes and turns upside down, and in all the Gospels Mary is the first witness. Of course at the time, women couldn't testify. Their words were not fact. They believed that only men could tell the truth. Jesus' resurrection flips the old order. Unlikely people may rise to the forefront, Mary has a shady past, is a woman, and yet she is GOD'S CHOICE FOR FIRST WITNESS!

The emphasis on female leadership also arose that evening as a white, upper class, lesbian woman named Jenny offered another form of the story:

She came alone hoping to make a difference, and sometimes the smallest difference matters the most. He was gone! She was not ignored, not unnamed when he was around. To him, she had a name. He used her name. It was over now—he was gone. But he wasn't gone; he comes forth from the garden. He tells her to tell the others. Tell the brothers, the sisters, and the donkey gatherers that I have risen. Be the guide Mary, be the witness for all others to follow.

In sermons like these, upper class members anchored gender equality in the authority of the scriptures by emphasizing the ability of women to lead and teach those pursuing a Christian life in the same way they did in the life of Jesus.

Upper class members also emphasized the importance of women in the leadership and operation of the church. As such, these speakers often employed the performance of sermons to recognize the work of women in the church. A typical example of this practice may be found in the following sermon by a white, upper class, gay man named Michael:

Standing under a large tent during a service dedicating the accomplishments of the church, and the installation of an interim pastor, the members watch as Michael stands in front of the podium. After watching the crowd for a moment, Michael states, "I would like to ask for all the men present here today to help me with something. We can never take for granted the commitment, leadership, and work women have done for the betterment of our community throughout the years. I would ask that each of you stand with me and let us applaud these women here today as we celebrate this community." As all the men stood and began to applaud, many of the women in attendance had tears in their eyes, and others bowed their heads for a few moments. As the men sat down, many of the women present began to smile at each other and at some of the men taking seats. On a special occasion with over 100 people present, many of which were not members of the church, the men took a moment to recognize the women in the congregation.

Moreover, upper class members stressed the importance of equitable partnerships between women and men in the leadership of a Christian community. The following discussion by an African-American, upper class, gay man named Micah provides a typical example:

Divided lives, you see, they overlook the good of creation and the power of incarnation in everything. Thinking about that I noticed how our board offers an example with women and men teamed up with equal votes working together. See people can help each other in so many ways by working together, and that means all people female and male, but our culture likes to separate us, likes to make up divisions, but we all know, we have seen it in this church and in our lives, we all know that women can often lead the way, can shed the light we all need, and Jesus knew this too. Just as Maria and Brian can each touch us with powerful songs, and Just as Jenny and I can each deliver sermons today, and just as Whitney or James might lead the service, God's work is for all of us and only by joining together can we hope to be our best, only as partners in these pursuits, through cooperation with each other, can we work towards a more equitable world for all of us.

In illustrations like these, upper class members emphasized the importance of women in the leadership and operation of the church by recognizing the work of women in the development of the church, and stressing the importance of equitable partnerships between women and men in the leadership of the congregation.

Upper class members also distanced themselves from inequitable gender patterns embedded in mainstream Christianity. Often, they employed sermons to frame the gender inequality in other churches as an affront to Christian morals. A typical example occurred one morning as a white, upper class, gay man named John explained the doxology of the church:

I remember this one time when a guy came to a service and was so surprised that he asked me where we came up with our doxology. I remember telling him that we simply took what was already there and adjusted the language to be more gender neutral, our creator instead of our father and stuff like that and provided opportunities for everyone to be involved, but what struck me was how surprised he was. He wasn't aware that the subordination of women came from the decisions of people, he had been taught that this was part of God's plan, and so I though it needed some repeating, we must remember that the scriptures portray women as our partners and often as our guides and teachers. Whether it's the use of language or authority, the treatment of women by traditional churches comes from the misuse of scripture in much the same way our own situation has arisen. It is our job to proclaim the truth of the Gospels and affirm the rights of women in the Christian

life. Let us learn from the surprise of visitors and teach them the truth.

In sermons like this, upper class members distanced Shepherd Church from patterns of gender inequality embedded in mainstream Christianity (See Adams 2007) while defining the subordination of women as an affront to true Christian morality.

Overall, upper class, white and African-American, lesbian women and gay men mobilized discourses of gender equality to construct moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. By anchoring gender equality in scriptural examples, emphasizing the importance of women in the leadership and operation of the church, and distancing themselves from the gender inequality embedded in mainstream Christian culture, these members defined the equalization of gender categories within the church as evidence of their moral worth. Moreover, they defined opposition to gender inequality as a central component of true Christian morality.

DISCUSSION

While prevailing Christian discourses define LGBT individuals in derogatory ways, the MCC members in this study interpreted this marginalization as indicative of their moral worth. Such identity work was anchored in the authority of the Bible, and intertwined with meanings of race, class, and gender. By mobilizing race, class, and gender discourses emphasizing the incorporation of racial diversity, the minimization of class distinctions, and the equalization of gender categories within their church, MCC members constructed moral identities as Christian sexual minorities. In addition, they also mitigated conflicts between their religious and sexual identities and claimed moral standing in the larger Christian tradition by anchoring these discourse in the authority of Christian scripture.

These findings have implications for understanding the integration of sexual and religious identities. While researchers generally emphasize the centrality of sexual orientation in the lived religious experiences of sexual minorities, my analysis supports and extends recent assertions that people's positions within systems of race, class, and gender inequality may significantly influence processes of sexual and religious identity integration (See McQueeney, 2009; Pitt, 2010). McQueeney, (2009) and Pitt (2010), for example, show how the race and gender characteristics of LGBT Christian individuals often constrain the strategies of identity integration available to them. Building on these insights, my study demonstrates that the race, class, and gender characteristics of an LGBT religious group may also provide symbolic resources for integrating disparate identity claims. As such, my study echoes McQueeney's (2009) assertion that in order to understand the complexities of religious and sexual identity integration, researchers must closely examine how intersections of race, class, and gender influence the religious experiences of

sexual minorities.

My findings also provide insight into the local construction of Christian morality. While religious researchers convincingly demonstrate that cultural discourses surrounding traditional Christian values (Gray & Thumma, 1997; Thumma & Gray, 2005), sexual norms (Wolkomir, 2006), family values (McQueeney, 2009), and conceptions of black masculinity (Pitt, 2010) exert considerable pressure upon the moral identity claims of LGBT Christians, relatively little is known about the local construction of Christian morality within LGBT religious communities (But see McQueeney 2009). My findings demonstrate that LGBT Christians may draw upon the symbolic resources available to them to locally construct a collective moral discourse (See Lee 2004). In so doing, members may draw upon collective conceptions of race, class, and gender to stabilize their moral identity claims, and redefine Christian morality within the context of their collective religious experience. Examining how LGBT individuals and groups draw upon scriptural and ritual resources to mobilize a collective moral discourse thus provides insight into the local construction of Christian morality.

Finally, these findings reveal the importance of taking an intersectional approach to the study of LGBT religious experience. Examining how LGBT people locally construct and mobilize discourses concerning racial, classed, gendered, sexual, and religious morality may enhance sociological understandings of the complexity of contemporary religious communities (See Thumma & Gray, 2005). As intersectional scholars have shown, social actors must negotiate both individual and collective moral identities in relation to their positions within multiple, interlocking systems of oppression and privilege, which permeate the entirety of social life (Collins, 2000; Deeb-Sossa, 2007; McQueeney, 2009). Fully understanding the dynamics of LGBT religious experience will thus require researchers to analyze the multitude of ways individual and collective conceptions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion configure the ongoing lives of LGBT individuals and groups.

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