"Somewhere between Evangelical and Queer": Sexual-Religious Identity Work in an LGBT

Christian Church

by

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Sitting at a table with a group of lesbian and gay Christians one night before Bible Study, a lesbian Christian woman named Andie (all names contained herein are pseudonyms) walked in visibly disturbed. When a couple of people at the table asked her if she was okay, Andie responded, "I just get so tired of explaining to people that it is possible for me to be a lesbian and a Christian," before taking her seat and grabbing a piece of candy from the jar in the middle of the table. Chuckling in unison with the rest of the table at the latest example of this common topic, a lesbian Christian woman named Carla responded, "It's okay honey, we all get tired of it. This morning Tommy and I, once again, had to explain to the people organizing the Pride Events that yes we are gay and yes we are Christian, but no we are not like "those" gays or "those" Christians." Echoing this sentiment, a gay Christian man named Denny added, "Don't let them bother you sugar, just tell them you live somewhere between Evangelical and Queer and sit back and enjoy their confused reaction." While the laughter around the table increased in volume, a gay Christian man named Barney turned to me, and asked, "Can you explain this, I mean, you study this stuff. Why is it so hard for people to understand us?"

Echoing many conversations I have had with students when they learn of my extensive research into lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christian groups, this conversation reveals the "queer" social location occupied by religious sexual minorities at the present stage of

herstory[1]. Contemporary constructions of normative Christianity, for example, define sexual minorities as sinners, deviants, and abominations in the eyes of God (Wolkomir 2006). In a similar fashion, public officials, citizens, and researchers alike typically define the emergence and expression of the LGBT community as explicitly oppositional to Christianity (Fetner 2008). Although recent decades have witnessed the emergence of explicitly LGBT manifestations of Christian belief and practice (Sumerau 2012) and supposedly more traditional Christian groups that actively seek and support LGBT members (Wilcox 2009), the oppositional construction of normative Christian and LGBT cultures has left many Christian sexual minorities caught between two seemingly incompatible systems of meaning.

Drawing upon insights gained through over three years of ethnographic participation in a southeastern LGBT Christian church, this chapter examines how Christian sexual minorities respond to their precarious position between normative religious and sexual categories by doing "identity work," which refers to "anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others" (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 115). Specifically, this process involves the work people do to symbolically distinguish themselves from unwanted social labels in order to signify desirable selves. Rather than merely adopting normative depictions of Christian or LGBT cultures, the LGBT Christians at the heart of this study drew upon the symbolic resources at their disposal to fashion sexual-religious selves, and draw distinctions between themselves and normative depictions of Christian and LGBT people.

Importantly, previous research convincingly demonstrates that Christian sexual minorities may experience significant emotional, ideological, and identity-based dilemmas when

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[1] Although typically represented as "history," I employ the term herstory to draw attention to the social construction of language, and the tendency for supposedly "official" language to contain male and normative bias.

attempting to resist normative depictions of Christianity. In her examination of lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming congregations, for example, McQueeney (2009) found that Christian sexual minorities resisted normative interpretations of homosexual sin by minimizing, normalizing, and moralizing their sexual identities in relation to their religious practices. Similarly, Wolkomir (2006) found that gay Christian men in support groups alleviated feelings of guilt, shame, and fear by reinterpreting scriptural condemnations of homosexuality as the result of human prejudice rather than divine intention. While these studies left the ways Christian sexual minorities respond to normative depictions of LGBT culture unexplored, they revealed that LGBT people could draw upon elements of Christianity to resist condemnation and fashion creditable Christian selves.

Although it is not all that surprising that sexual minorities might face significant challenges within Christian settings, researchers have also shown that these people may face similar dilemmas when seeking shelter within LGBT cultures. Whereas some Queer organizations seek to align with Christian beliefs and practices in hopes of gaining greater social respectability (see Broad et al. 2004), many other components of LGBT culture explicitly reject the influence, significance, and legitimacy of Christianity. In her examination of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender religious women, for example, Wilcox (2009) found that many of these women left explicitly LGBT organizations, religious and secular, in order to escape perceived sexism and the dominance of gay men. Similarly, O'Brien (2004) found that lesbian women and gay men often joined religious organizations as a result of disagreements between their personal values and the sexual and social politics promoted by secular LGBT organizations. Rather than simply avoiding the condemnations of normative Christian groups by aligning themselves with explicitly LGBT groups, many religious sexual minorities, like the ones at the heart of this

chapter, thus find themselves outside the normative boundaries of both LGBT and religious

cultures, and caught in the middle of ongoing sexual and religious conflicts.

In this chapter, I examine how a group of LGBT Christians navigates their position

between normative Christian and LGBT cultures. Over three years, I attended and observed a

southeastern LGBT Christian church, which I refer to as Shepherd Church. Further, I conducted

over 350 informal and life history interviews with prominent members inside and outside of

church functions. I began my analysis by analyzing conversations, like the one at the beginning

of this chapter, concerning the "queer" social location of the members, and asking members how

they explained their sexual and religious identities. After comparing and contrasting their

answers as well as informal conversations, three main discourses the members used to signify

sexual-religious selves emerged, which I labeled humorous, emotional, and evangelical.

Sexual-Religious Identity Work

What follows is an analysis of how members of Shepherd Church discursively

constructed LGBT Christian identities in ways that symbolically distinguished them from

normative depictions of Christian and LGBT cultures. First, I show how members mobilized

humorous discourses, which defined people that were "too" Christian or "too" Queer as silly and

unworthy of notice. Second, I examine how members mobilized emotional discourses to define

themselves as both deeply isolated from and connected to both Christian and LGBT cultures.

Third, I analyze how members mobilized evangelical discourses to define themselves as "in, but

not of" both Christian and Queer cultures and capable guides for educating both groups.

Humorous

Rather than spontaneous episodes, humorous discourses arise within the context of

ongoing social relationships and refer to the shared history of particular groups. Specifically, all

groups may develop sets of humorous references known to members, which may be referred to and used to signify shared identities (Fine and DeSoucey 2005). As a result, people may use humorous discourses, or jokes, to signify the types of social beings they believe themselves to be, and distance themselves from unwanted social labels. In Shepherd Church, LGBT Christians accomplished both of these goals by "making fun" of normative depictions of Christian and LGBT cultures, and symbolically positioning themselves between these two extremes.

While the LGBT Christians I studied did not talk about their humorous discourses as "resistant" to normative depictions of Christian culture per se, they generally defined "normal Christians" by making fun of them. As a lesbian woman named Amy explained in Bible Study:

> I've never been able to relate to most Christians. Before I got involved here, I always felt like Christians took themselves way too seriously, and wasted most of their time worrying about what other people were doing. I mean, you know how they are, the normal Christians, they are always just hooting and hollering over something silly. They just always seem to be carrying on about something crazy, it's hilarious.

By defining "normal Christians" as "crazy" or "hilarious," Amy echoed others that depicted normative Christianity as extremist and difficult to take seriously. Statements like this also implied that Shepherd Church members practiced a different sort of religion. A lesbian woman named Jenny made a similar point when two gay male members came to worship wearing suits:

> Awe, everybody look, we got us some "real" Christians here today. We better be on our best behavior – Patricia cross your legs, Sandy go get the good rainbow flag, and ooh, Michael hide your makeup bag sugar. We gonna do us some Bible thumping!

Since Shepherd Church members typically dressed in more casual clothing than normative Christian traditions (see Sumerau and Schrock 2011), Jenny took the entrance of people wearing

what could be considered "their Sunday Best" to distinguish between LGBT Christians and

normative Christianity. As a gay man named John noted in an interview:

> I think what separates us from the typical Christians, if you can call them that, is that we
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> just have more fun than Christians are supposed to. After all, life is too short to spend all
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> your time yelling like a bunch of fools about every little thing like they do.

Echoing Jenny and other members, John defined "typical Christians" as people that spent all

their time "yelling like a bunch of fools" while depicting LGBT Christians as "more fun." In all

such cases, Shepherd Church members thus constructed LGBT Christian identities by poking fun

at "other" types of Christians.

Whereas Shepherd Church members typically distanced themselves from normative

Christian culture by defining themselves as more fun and less serious, they typically took the

opposite approach when attempting to distinguish LGBT Christianity from normative depictions

of LGBT culture. As a bisexual man named Dana explained following a worship service:

> The problem with the so-called Queers is that they don't take anything seriously. Family,
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> they don't care. God, they don't care. I don't know what they stand for other than
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> simply screwing everything in sight, and trying to make other people feel bad for wanting
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> normal, moral lives. Unfortunately, most people think we're all like that.

By defining the "so-called Queers" as uncaring people that "don't take anything seriously" and

waste their lives "screwing everything in sight," Dana symbolically distinguished between

"normal, moral" LGBT people and supposedly unsavory others. Echoing these sentiments, a gay

man named Micah recalled difficulties he had faced with the local LGBT community:

> I was originally hesitant about coming to a gay church because of how the other gay
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> groups in the area are. Basically, they always seemed like drama factories filled with

nothing but sex-obsessed jerks looking to score or party or whatever, and I figured this

group would be the same. Luckily, there are actual adults here. Unlike the other gay

groups, our church actually takes things seriously and tries, although the other groups

make it really hard, to present a more positive image of gay people.

Echoing Dana and others, Tommy defined other LGBT groups as "drama factories" and "sex-

obsessed" parties where people did not take life seriously. While each of the illustrations above

was met with thunderous laughter, these discursive put-downs relied upon the definition of other

LGBT groups as unsavory and ultimately problematic. As a lesbian woman named Saundra

noted when discussing PRIDE events: "The good news is we get to show off what the church is

doing. The bad news is that we have to put up with the children, and whatever craziness "those

gays" decide to get into." Members thus claimed LGBT Christian selves by putting down other

LGBT groups, and defining themselves as "normal" and "moral" sexual minorities.

Overall, Shepherd Church members mobilized humorous discourses to construct LGBT

Christian identities and distinguish themselves from normative depictions of LGBT and

Christian cultures. Specifically, they used humor to define "normal Christians" as overly serious

people incapable of having fun, and depict "typical LGBT groups" as people lacking moral

fortitude and maturity. While every member did not make these statements, all of the members

affirmed those that did, and generally responded with rather enthusiastic bursts of laughter. In so

doing, they created a shared language whereby members could signify LGBT Christian identities

by poking fun at unwanted elements of normative Christian and LGBT experience.

Emotional

Emotions play a primary role in the social construction of identities. Specifically,

identities typically contain cultural notions of "appropriate" feelings as well as rules concerning

emotional expression and intimacy (Hochschild 1983). In order to signify masculine selves, for example, males typically must learn how to appear emotionally reserved, and limit emotional displays in the presence of others (Vaccarro et al. 2011). Similarly, male-to-female transsexuals may claim feminine selves by learning how to properly manage and display emotions during interactions with others (Schrock et al. 2004). As a result, people may also talk about emotional experiences in ways that signify identity claims. In the case of Shepherd Church, members signified LGBT Christian identities by mobilizing emotional discourses, which simultaneously expressed their isolation from and connection to both normative Christian and LGBT cultures.

Similar to many other LGBT Christian people (see Wolkomir 2006), Shepherd Church members were intimately familiar with normative Christian condemnations of homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexuality. A lesbian woman named Shannon, for example, explained how such condemnations left members feeling isolated from other Christians: "Other Christians just make it really clear that we don't belong. It leaves you feeling lost and alone in this world when other faith communities turn their backs on you." Similarly, a gay man named Tommy recalled: "I can't count the number of tears or the times I just felt so alone in other churches. I just felt like I wasn't allowed to be part of the group." Echoing others, Tommy and Shannon recalled feeling isolated from normative Christian groups before coming to Shepherd Church. Rather than forsaking Christian practice, however, members sought to reclaim the positive feelings they experienced attending churches as children. As a bisexual transwoman named Alice explained:

> I think the main reason for this place is to form an alternative. Many of us, myself
> included, grew up feeling so loved and so deeply connected to a community of fellow
> believers that when we lost that later in life we desperately wanted it back. That is what

we are going for here. We are building a place outside traditional churches where we can

express our connection to God in fellowship with people that love and accept us.

Echoing others, Alice sought to rebuild her "connection to God" and the positive feelings she

associated with her religious upbringing by engaging in Christian practice "outside" normative

Christian culture. As a lesbian woman named Marnie explained: "We are kind of in the middle

because we all feel this deep passion for God and for church, but we are also cast out from

normal churches." Shepherd Church members thus claimed LGBT Christian identities in order

to remain connected to Christianity despite their isolation from normative Christian culture.

Similar to many other sexual minorities (O'Brien 2004), Shepherd Church members

initially experienced feelings of relief, exhilaration, and freedom when they came into contact

with LGBT cultures. A gay man named Peter, for example, recalled the emotional release he

experienced the first time he attended a gay Pride parade:

It was like freedom finally had a name. I just felt automatically connected to these

people and our shared struggle. It was kind of like a religious experience for me. I just

felt washed over by the love and kindness and affirmation in the crowds and at the booths

dotting the street. I wasn't alone anymore, and maybe I didn't have to hide.

Similar to many other members, Peter came from a religious tradition that defined him as inferior

or damaged, and as a result, his early experiences with LGBT groups introduced him to the

possibility that he was okay and not "alone anymore." As a lesbian woman named Whitney

explained: "It was so strange to feel like I was maybe a good person, and I had walked right by

this lesbian bar a hundred times without knowing my people were there." Like Whitney, many

members talked about other LGBT people as their "people." While all the members talked about

feeling connected to the larger LGBT community and expressed their desire to support other

LGBT people, they often felt like normative depictions of LGBT culture did not represent their lives. A gay man named Barney, for example, explained: "I'm all for community, but I sometimes feel left out when other gay men go on and on about sex, sex, sex. I like that I'm accepted, but I just don't quite fit." Similarly, a lesbian woman named Carla explained:

> I think feeling the safety and love I find in other gay groups is priceless, but at the same time it hurts to see the lack of morals and the lack of God in most of the groups. My faith is the most important thing in the world, and I always just felt like there wasn't room for it in the community. Like the speaker we had a couple weeks ago, I just always felt like I was kind of part of the group, but also kind of an outsider.

Echoing many other members, Carla and Barney simultaneously felt like they were members and outsiders within the larger LGBT community. As a gay man named Raymond explained: "I think if you tried to explain what it feels like to be a gay Christian, you could say someone that is not quite stereotypically gay or typically Christian, but maybe the best of both sides."

By constructing LGBT Christianity as an emotional experience of both isolation from and connection to normative Christian and LGBT cultures, Shepherd Church members thus invoked emotion to explain their "queer" social location. Here we see how people can employ their feelings to signify sexual-religious identities that do not align with conventional sexual and religious categories (see also Wolkomir 2006). Sometimes people, like the members of Shepherd Church, do not fit into normative social categories. Rather than defining themselves as Christians that happen to be queer or as queers that happen to practice Christianity, such identity work can powerfully evoke emotional attachments to a group. Overall, through mobilizing emotional discourses, Shepherd Church members made sense of their precarious social locations by constructing specifically LGBT Christian selves.

Evangelical

In our current time period, one major element of normative Christian culture is the evangelical assertion that Christians live *in* this world while not being *of* this world (see Smith et al. 1998). Taken from specific passages in the New Testament, this belief rests upon the idea that while Christian people must inhabit the fallen or natural world for a time, their spiritual essence lies in a higher plane of existence located in God's eternal kingdom. As a result, normative Christian culture preaches that believers should experience social life in between the worlds of nature and God, and serve as guides or witnesses for all non-believers. While not all the LGBT Christians I studied embraced this particular evangelical idea, all of them were aware that they experienced social life between the Christian and LGBT worlds, and many argued that this position in, but not of, Christian and LGBT cultures made them especially well-suited to serve as guides for both of these groups.

Shepherd Church members regularly talked about experiencing life in, but not of both Christian and LGBT cultures. A lesbian woman named Laney, for example, explained: "We live on the margins of the margins I guess you could say. We are not quite Christians according to most people, but we are not quite the gays either." Similarly, a gay man named Marcus noted: "I think most of us go back and forth if you know what I mean. Sometimes we hang out in the gay crowd, and other times we blend in to the Christian crowd, but in the end we aren't really fully part of either group." In statements like this, Shepherd Church members recognized that they were involved with Christians and LGBT people, but they didn't quite fit in with either. As a lesbian woman named Karen explained: "We tend to take the best of both sides. So I might go to the Evangelical church because they have good music, and then I might go to a lesbian party to meet people, but in the end I come back here where I belong." Similarly, a bisexual man

named Dana remarked: "Well it is kind of like you and me being neither gay or straight if you think about it. We fit in well enough with both groups when we want to, but neither group completely understands us." Echoing others, Dana and Karen expressed interests in taking advantage of their position between both cultures in order to acquire offerings from both sides. In so doing, they discursively constructed LGBT Christian experience as a middle ground between normative Christian and LGBT cultures.

Shepherd Church members also interpreted their "in between" status as an opportunity to educate other Christian or LGBT people. A gay man named Tommy, for example, explained the benefits that came from an LGBT Christian perspective:

> In some ways, we live what the Evangelicals talk about. We exist in between two worlds that are ultimately opposed to each other, and thus we understand the issues from both sides. As a result, we try to make a space where gay people can learn that Christianity doesn't have to be their enemy, and we go out among the Christians to show them that not all gay people oppose Christian values. So you could say our own lives become a form of Christian testimony capable of broadening God's reach.

Similarly, a lesbian woman named Whitney remarked: "We have an opportunity as people that understand Jesus and gay relationships to educate others, and teach them how to move beyond hate through the love of Jesus." Further, a gay man named Barney noted: "I find it hard to believe that anyone could be more qualified than us to handle the whole religion and homosexuality debate. We understand the issues better than anyone, and it is our job to teach other people a better way." As these illustrations suggest, Shepherd Church members believed their position between normative Christian and LGBT cultures gave them special insight into contemporary debates concerning sexuality and religion. As a result, many of them considered it

their Christian and LGBT duty to champion the cause of integration. In so doing, their statements also constructed LGBT Christian identities as social categories situated in but not of normative LGBT and Christian cultures.

Overall, Shepherd Church members used their "queer" social location to define themselves as especially well suited for educating other Christian and LGBT people. In so doing, they echoed Evangelical assertions that Christians must live within worlds where they don't fully belong. It is important to note, however, that not all members invoked this evangelical discourse. Even so, no one ever questioned or challenged the members that did mobilize these discourses. As a result, all members played a part in collectively constructing LGBT Christian identities as in but not of either normative LGBT or Christian cultures, and as important credentials for witnessing to and guiding other people.

Conclusions

The members of Shepherd Church found themselves in a "queer" social location between normative Christian and LGBT cultures. Rather than simply adopting either normative Christian or LGBT practices, however, they sought to fashion a symbolic space between these supposedly oppositional cultures. As a result, they collectively drew upon elements of both Christian and LGBT culture to construct LGBT Christian identities. Specifically, they accomplished this by mobilizing humorous, emotional, and evangelical discourses that symbolically positioned LGBT Christianity somewhere between evangelical and queer cultural norms.

Importantly, the case of Shepherd Church reveals the importance of attending to the interactional construction of sexual and religious identities. Rather than simply picking our sexual or religious identities from some pre-selected cultural list, we all may, like the members of Shepherd Church, construct and signify the people we believe ourselves to be and actively

affirm the religious and sexual identity claims of others. In so doing, we may create new possibilities for both self-expression and social acceptance. In contrast, we may act in ways, regardless of our intentions, that pressure others to conform to socially constructed sexual and religious categories, and in so doing, reproduce meaning systems where many people feel left out or unwanted. Like the members of Shepherd Church, we may thus all construct and affirm systems of social meaning in the course of our everyday social interactions. As a result, we all possess the power to either create room for people that find themselves lost between seemingly oppositional identity categories, or reproduce patterns of interaction that celebrate some while isolating and marginalizing others.

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