

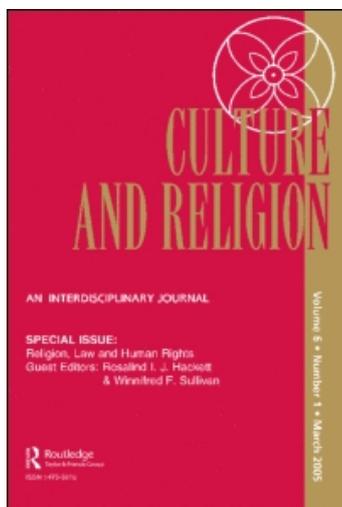
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WRESTLING THE ANGEL OF CONTRADICTION: QUEER CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES

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Jodi O'Brien

*This ethnographically based article is about the ways in which individuals who choose to remain in mainstream Christian denominations while being out about their sexuality make sense of and manage the presumed discontinuity of homosexuality and Christianity. In this article I focus specifically on the processes whereby lesbian and gay Christians forge an integration of Christian doctrine, spirituality and sexuality. My central interpretive claim is that this integrative struggle is experienced by lesbian and gay Christians as a *raison d'être*. Wrestling this contradiction has given rise to a particular expression of queer Christian identity. Among the many implications of these expressions of queer Christian identity is their impact on mainstream Christian congregations and Christian ideologies and practices.*

KEYWORDS Christianity; homosexuality; self and identity

I wanted gays to be in the vanguard, battling against racial and economic injustice and religious and political oppression. I never thought I would see the day when gays would be begging to be let back into the Christian Church, which is clearly our enemy. (Edmund White, author)

Seven reasons why you should absolutely, positively stay away from church ... [reason number four]. The way some churches can get God to fit into those little boxes. (Posted flyer, Spirit of the Sound: Gay and Lesbian Followers of Jesus)

I had to go to a non-Christian church for four years before I understood what it means to be a good Christian. A good Christian has a very big god. (Larry, Gay male and practicing Catholic)

Introduction

Several years ago I attended Pride Parades in three different cities during the same month. The San Francisco Parade is becoming an increasingly somber affair, I thought to myself as I noted the serious faces on the police who monitored the barriers holding back protesters. An air of gaiety prevailed. But the atmosphere also carried indications of what some observers have called the 'homogenisation' or commercialisation of gay culture.¹ The San Francisco parade, more so than any other perhaps, marks the contradictions of an expanding lesbian and gay presence in public spheres, including the protest movements. In Seattle, a bastion of politically correct postures, locals pride themselves on their tolerance. Here the parade is just another occasion to bring the family and have a good time—whoever you are. In this city the contradictions exist behind the scenes. Each year, during the planning of the parade, questions of inclusion and exclusion arise as the planning board debates whether to include groups such as North American Man-Boy Love Association² or 'too obvious drag queens'—anyone who may evoke discomfort in this crowd that is trying so hard to be accepting of difference. Chicago seems the most relaxed. Perhaps it is the heat, but the cops seem indifferent to the public drinking and appear almost jovial, occasionally flirtatious. It feels like a neighborhood block party among causal, easy-going friends.

Each parade feels distinct to me. The differences do not surprise me. In many ways, they reflect the mosaic of responses to the proliferation of lesbian and gay presence and politics in recent decades. Perhaps this is why I am so surprised at one notable similarity that occurs at all three parades. Among the marchers in each parade are groups representing friends and supporters of lesbians and gays: PFLAG, AT&T Queer Allies, US Bank LGBT Employee Support, and so forth. In each case, the crowd responds enthusiastically at this display of support and acceptance. People clap and cheer and whistle in appreciation. The marchers glow in acknowledgement. This is not what surprises me. Rather, it is the contrast in the crowd's response to another group of marchers: lesbian and gay Christians and, specifically, Mormons (who march under the banner of Affirmation) and Catholics (who call their association Dignity). In these three very distinct US cities I wandered up and down the streets during each parade, watching as merry crowds fell silent at the appearance of these marchers. Everywhere the response was the same: silence, broken only by an occasional boo. I was stunned. These otherwise very 'normal' looking but openly queer men and women (some of whom really did look like the stereotypical Mormon missionary) were being booed at their own Pride Parades.

On reflection, this response—at best indifferent, at worst disdainful—makes sense if viewed within the framework of the cultural secularism that pervades 'progressive' US politics. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are often perceived as an anathema to liberal progressive politics. It is likely that many parade bystanders were genuinely confused at what must have

seemed an obvious contradiction: openly queer, openly religious. For some parade-goers, the presence of these lesbian and gay Christians might even have been a form of betrayal given the active anti-homosexual preaching of both the Vatican and Mormon leaders. In any case, my curiosity was aroused. What compelled someone to want to parade both statuses? My initial impression was that lesbian and gay Christians must experience a form of 'double stigma'. Christian denominations routinely denounce homosexuality. For many lesbians and gays, a flight from religious intolerance is a central aspect of personal 'coming out' stories. Religion is clearly the enemy. Further, there is a pronounced secularism in the rhetoric of the small but prolific elite whose words and images have propelled lesbian and gay literature and culture into the mainstream. Good queers are not religious.

Obviously there are many closeted gays and lesbians. Similarly, although I really had not thought much about it until the occasion of the parades, there are probably many open lesbians and gays who harbor secret religious inclinations. What seemed to confuse and unsettle the crowd was the open expression of such an apparent contradiction. Why would any self-respecting queer want also to embrace Christianity with its seemingly inevitable denouncement and exclusion? And why, especially, would they want to announce this involvement to fellow queers, knowing the disdain and rejection that this was likely to incur?

Compelled by these questions I began to research what I called 'double stigma.' Specifically, I was interested in lesbians and gays who are openly queer and openly Christian. How did they make sense of and manage this 'double stigma' I wondered? The concept of 'double stigma' was sociologically rigorous enough to garner me research support for the project. Armed with this idea, the financial blessing of the American Sociological Association, and a solid track record of ethnographic experience, I set off in search of answers. Five open-ended interviews into the project, I knew the concept of 'double-stigma' was completely off the mark. I was missing the main point. When I raised the idea of 'double-stigma'—How do you deal with it? Why do you deal with it?—the first round of interviewees all looked at me with similar confusion. Yes, they understood the question. Yes, they could understand how others would see it that way. But it did not resonate for them. Each of these five people, none of whom knew one another, said the same thing. This was not about stigma. It was about 'living a contradiction that defines who I am.'

Forty-two interviews and many hours of congregational participation later I was still hearing the same thing: the contradiction of being Christian and being queer is who I am. When I gave talks describing the research project I noticed the vigorous head-nodding among self-described queer Christians at the mention of the phrase, 'living the contradiction.' My orienting perspective at the launch of this project reflected my penchant for sociological abstraction and personal experiences that disincite me toward participation in mainstream religions (I am a former Mormon with a typical 'flight from religion' experience through the process of becoming a lesbian). Through sustained contact and

participatory experience with self-described 'queer Christians' and the congregations that welcome them, I developed an understanding of the deeply complex process of living the contradiction of being queer and Christian. In fact, over time, I have come to have considerable appreciation for this process.

Research Setting and Methodology

This article is based on a more comprehensive project in which I develop the thesis that the contradictions between Christianity and homosexuality are the driving tensions in the formulation of a historically specific expression of queer religiosity. These expressions are manifested in individual identities and practices, in community practices (i.e. Christian congregations), and in ideological discourses (i.e. theological and doctrinal discourses). The transformative processes occurring at each of these levels are mutually constitutive. In this article I focus specifically on the processes whereby lesbian and gay Christians³ forge an integration of Christian doctrine, spirituality and sexuality.⁴ My central interpretive claim in this paper is that this integrative struggle is experienced by lesbian and gay Christians as a *raison d'être*. Wrestling this contradiction has given rise to a particular expression of queer Christian identity. Among the many implications of these expressions of queer Christian identity is their impact on mainstream Christian congregations and Christian ideologies and practices. I describe these implications briefly in the conclusions.

As I have noted in the Introduction, my original intent was to understand the motivations and experiences of lesbian and gay Catholics and Mormons who wished to be recognised explicitly for both their religiosity and sexuality. I began the project by talking with several such individuals, including my hairstylist, a self-described 'flaming queen with a flair for building miniature houses' who is also active in his local Catholic parish. Larry's openly gay behavior was considered outrageous even by the standards of the gay-friendly hair salon that he worked in. Quite frankly, I could not imagine what his fellow parishioners made of his queerness. Yet Larry seemed to have found quite a home there. He spoke often and enthusiastically about his involvement with the parish. He invited me to attend services and, eventually, several meetings of the lay ministry, to experience for myself what his 'contradictory' world was like. Another point of entry came through a colleague who had granted me a formal interview and then invited me to attend services at Seattle's First Baptist where he was an active participant. Later his congregation invited me to participate as a speaker in their ongoing 'Adult Education' series—a version of Sunday School. They wanted to explore the theme of sexuality and asked if I would kick-off the topic. Jim, my colleague and interview subject, was instrumental in organising the series and in setting me up with subsequent interviews.

Through participation in these congregational activities I was introduced to more lesbian and gay Christians who granted me interviews and put me in contact with other friends and colleagues throughout the western United States

and British Columbia. I also learned first-hand of the tensions taking place within the congregations that were supportive of lesbian and gay members.⁵ The late 1990s was a time of ferment within Christian congregations regarding the presence and affirmation of lesbian and gay members. In this respect, the timing of my research was serendipitous. In recognition of these community and organisational tensions, I expanded my interviews to include heterosexual congregants and clergy members. I also expanded my participation to several regional congregations representing Episcopalian, Methodist, Unitarian, and Presbyterian denominations, in addition to my initial participation with Baptist, Catholic and Mormon groups. My formal research process included 63 open-ended interviews and sustained contact with five congregations and two lesbian/gay Christian groups (Affirmation and Dignity) for a period of three years.

During this time I came to recognise what I term a 'field of relations,' which includes lesbian and gay Christians, the congregations in which they have found a 'spiritual community,' the general membership of these congregations, the congregational ministries, and the relationships between these congregations and their denominational organisations. There is awareness among these congregations that they are part of a historical moment that is fraught with considerable tension and debate regarding the very definition of Christianity. In this regard, I think it accurate to talk in terms of a social movement that is taking place within the pews (with a distinctly different genesis and process from LGBT political movements as they are typically presented in the social movements literature).

My research methods are consistent with ethnographic interpretive methodologies in which the intent is to articulate fields of relations and the intrapersonal and interpersonal relations that occur within these fields. My approach is especially informed by feminist methodologies, according to which my intent is to ascertain what persons within the field of inquiry have to say for themselves while remaining cognisant of my own relationship with these persons and my influence within the field of relations. At the same time, my work is strongly influenced by sociological theories that orient me toward ascertaining patterned discourses regarding how people make sense of themselves—what stories they tell themselves about who they are and what they can do—especially regarding conflict and contradiction (O'Brien 2001a; Plummer 1995). My observations and conclusions are interpretations that reflect my sociological orientation. Throughout the research process I presented myself as a sociologist with special interests in religion and sexuality. Early in the research process people became aware of my project and approached me about being interviewed and/or having me visit their congregations. This awareness and interest confirms my observation that a self-aware field of relations regarding queer Christian identities exists. My interpretations are limited to the specific context of this research project. However, my aim with this in-depth inquiry is to provide empirical insight and grounding for the conceptual frameworks through which scholars attempt to understand the integration of religion and sexuality generally.⁶

The 'Gay Predicament': An Irreconcilable Contradiction

Homosexuality is intrinsically disordered. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, 566)

The 'question of homosexuality' has been a central focus of discussion in Catholic and Protestant denominations since the 1960s. Historically, homosexuality is forbidden in most Christian doctrines. In these texts the homosexual has been variously defined as 'disordered,' 'evil,' and 'sinful' (Conrad and Schneider 1980; O'Brien 2001b). In many texts homosexuality is rendered as absolutely irreconcilable with the basic tenets of Christianity. Recent revisions of a few doctrines offer a slightly more forgiving interpretation wherein homosexual behavior is separated from homosexual identity.⁷ The new Catechism, for instance, defines homosexual inclinations (identity) as a 'condition' that is not chosen and is experienced as a 'trial' (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, 566). Grappling with this affliction can be a lifetime struggle and those who are 'successful' in taming the beast of homosexuality can expect the same joys and blessings as other good Catholics.⁸ In this rendering the act is the sin, while desire is an affliction. In an accompanying passage, the text admonishes all Catholics to treat persons who suffer the condition of homosexuality with 'respect, compassion and sensitivity' (1994, 566). Progressive Catholics see this doctrine as at least an acknowledgement that homosexuality exists. The separation of act and identity is considered by some to be a statement of acceptance. Still, even in this supposedly progressive statement, the 'homosexual' is rendered as someone (something) lacking, someone whose desires are a potential source of shame and exile.

Doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which Christians initially experience their homosexuality. At worst, they are irredeemable sinners: at best, they suffer from problems or afflictions. Given this discourse of rejection, non-Christians might assume that the simplest path would be the renunciation of religion. For many Christians struggling with feelings of homosexuality the path is not so simple.

Psychologists of religion offer a holistic explanation for sustained Christian participation, even when the participation involves conflict. According to this thesis, Christianity is a well-established and deeply meaningful cosmology that weaves together spirit, intellect, body and community (Fortunato 1982). Christianity offers answers to big questions such as the meaning of life and death. Religious participation is also a means of transcending the oppressions and banalities of everyday living. For many Christians, the traditional ceremonies of religious expression are both evocative and comforting. Thus, motivation for participation is not so much the puzzle. In fact, to frame the question this way, as many studies of religion and homosexuality (including my own initial research proposal) do, is arguably to impose a secular perspective on a religious question.⁹ Rather, the puzzle becomes: How does the homosexual make sense of the fact that, by definition, he/she is considered an exile who is beyond the

promised redemption of Christian theology? Christian therapist John Fortunato refers to this as the 'gay predicament.' The 'gay predicament,' simply put, is that one cannot be a good Christian and also be queer.

The intensity of this contradiction can only be fully understood within a framework of Christian experience. Within a heteronormative culture, lesbians and gays are (often painfully) aware that they are social cast-offs. Within Christianity, active homosexuals are also aware that, in addition to their being social cast-offs, their souls have been cast off as well. This predicament poses a tremendous existential crisis. To experience homosexual desires, and certainly to pursue fulfillment of these desires, will result in being cast out from the cosmology through which one makes sense of one's life. One obvious solution is to cast off Christian theology in favor of the homosexual identity. This is easier said than done, however. Bending the rules is one thing, but shedding an entire structure of meaning may leave one cast adrift in a sea of meaninglessness – which may be even less tolerable than the knowledge that one is potentially damned. This is a defining predicament for lesbian and gay Christians. It is also a profound set of contradictions. Abandoning Christianity may mean losing a sense of meaning and purpose, yet keeping this particular religion means facing the prospect of damnation.

Queer Secularism

In addition to the predicament of exile, lesbian and gay Christians who are open about their religiosity face rejection from other queers. Lesbian and gay political activists, scholars and writers tend to be critical and dismissive of Christianity. The following remark from gay author John Preston (known especially for his anthologies of gay male short stories) is indicative of the discourse of disdain prevalent among lesbian and gay activists and artists. Preston was invited by Brian Bouldrey to write a chapter for his anthology, *Wrestling with the Angel: Religion in the Lives of Gay Men*. This is his response:

I'd have nothing to say in your anthology. As an atheist I have no angels with which to wrestle, and, to be honest, I think adults who worry about such a decrepit institution as organized religion should drink plenty of fluids, pop an aspirin, and take a nap, in hopes that the malady will pass.
(Quoted in Bouldrey 1995, xi).

Thus, lesbian or gay Christians who seek comfort and insight among fellow queers may be setting themselves up for further disdain and rejection because of their religious affiliation. The queer Christian is doubly damned: according to Christian doctrine, homosexuality is an affliction; among fellow (non-Christian) lesbians and gays, religious affiliation may be the affliction. Not only can one not be a good Christian and be queer, apparently one cannot be a good queer and be religious. Or, as Elizabeth Stuart, author of a guide for LGBT Christians, so

aptly phrases it, 'queer Christians find themselves caught as it were between the devil and the rainbow, aliens in both lands' (1997, 13).¹⁰

Persons who have been 'spun off from their galaxy of meaning' (Fortunato 1982)—in this case, heteronormative acceptance and Christian systems of meaning and purpose—seek reintegration into new systems of meaning. For instance, heterosexual persons who are inclined, for whatever reasons, to denounce their religious roots usually construct new systems of meaning within secular frameworks. Persons who find themselves spun off from heterosexual culture often find meaning in queer groups that have articulated anti-straight philosophies and practices.

Religious Individualism

In her dissertation on members of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), Melissa Wilcox chronicles the stories of LGBT Christians and their struggle to reconcile spirituality and sexuality. Her research indicates that even before finding the MCC, which offers a community of like-minded fellows, individuals experienced long struggles around coming out. Wilcox refers to this struggle as an 'immense crisis of identity.' She observes that most members '[forge] their own paths to self-acceptance and spiritual wholeness' prior to joining MCC (Wilcox 2000, 135). Wilcox offers a theoretical interpretation situated in the concept of 'religious individualism' (Roof 1999). There is a double-thread to her thesis. The way in which individual lesbians and gays reconcile their predicament is often a solitary process, one that reflects aspects of a culture of religious individualism rather than community and congregational support. At the same time, the increasing visibility of LGBT members in Christian religions may also reflect a general climate of religious individualism.¹¹ The title of her dissertation, 'Two Roads Converged,' is a kind of double-play that indicates the road not taken (refusal to renounce forbidden sexuality in this case), and also the manner in which individual reconciliation of this 'immense crisis of identity' converges in similar experiences, expressions and ways of making sense of the contradiction.

This religious individualism is evident in my research as well. Individuals experience an awakening of both religiosity and homosexuality that is very personal and profound. This awakening ushers in a sense of contradiction and a desire to somehow reintegrate themselves into the system of meaning from which they now feel outcast. Interviewees describe this period of initial struggle as very lonely and painful. There is a sense of insurmountable shame and alienation. The path to resolution is a solitary one. Given this, it is especially noteworthy that individual forms of resolution converge in a very similar and particular ways.

Responses to the Gay Predicament¹²

Anecdotal and experiential information suggests three general sorts of

responses to the gay predicament: denunciation and flight, acceptance of the doctrine of shame, and articulation of an alternative (queer) religiosity. The first, denunciation and flight, is a well-known story among many lesbians and gay men. Many 'coming out' stories involve a process of renouncing religious roots. These stories can be interpreted as a statement of renunciation and opposition against a system of meaning in which lesbians and gays find no place for themselves. These expressions involve a process of reshaping one's sense of self and identity in opposition to religious teachings and practices. For many individuals, this is a painful and alienating process that involves not only casting off an entire system of meaning and belonging, but forging a new (non-Christian) ideology. As one former Mormon missionary-turned-lesbian put it:

Non-Mormons don't get that Mormonism answers your questions about everything. Now I have to wonder about every little thing. Do I still believe in monogamy? Or is that something I should throw out along with Mormonism? Do I still believe in life-after-death? Marriage? Commitment? What do I believe in? It's all a big gaping hole for me now. (Lori)¹³

For many the struggle is about how to (re)integrate with society more generally. This is often done through alignment with other queer groups and the articulation of a discourse whereby the religious community, not the individual, is seen as the problem. In this instance, throwing off the cloak of religious shame is seen as an act of liberation:

Healthy living means finding ways to throw off the guilt. It's not just the guilt of feeling like you've betrayed your family and friends and their expectations for you. It's the guilt that comes from messages all around you that you don't belong. That you're an aberration. Until one day you start to get it and say, hey, I'm here. I'm doing okay. I must belong. When you figure that out you have the courage to walk away from the [church] and realize the problem is them. They're not big enough to let you belong. (Brian)

This group of 'recovering Christians' may be the least tolerant of lesbians and gays who attempt to find a place for themselves within Christianity.

Another familiar, and similarly complex, response is to learn to accept Christian teachings that render homosexuality an affliction. In such instances, the struggle to be a good Christian (and a good person generally as defined through adherence to Christian principles) revolves around the struggle to sustain celibacy. Homosexual reintegration into Christianity involves accepting the definition of an afflicted self, donning a cloak of shame regarding one's homosexuality (or, minimally, a cloak of sickness), and embarking upon the struggle indicated by this affliction. The literature on ex-gay therapies and ministries, most of which consists of personal narratives and 'undercover' participant observation, indicates that those who seek out these 'therapies' are likely to come from strong Christian backgrounds. Often they are referred to the thera-

pies by a Church leader in whom they have confided (see, for instance, Harryman 1991). In these cases, the homosexual Christian who is not 'cured' is encouraged to remain 'closeted' if he/she wishes to maintain a position in the religious community.

My focus is on those individuals who endeavor to maintain both a strong Christian identity and an open and 'proud' lesbian or gay identity. These people recognise their distinct position with respect to those who renounce Christianity and those who accept Christian definitions of affliction. A defining feature of this group is the desire to (re)integrate within a Christian system of meaning while maintaining a queer identity and, ideally, to integrate both identities within a common community. Given this, especially viewed within the framework of the other paths of response, it is possible to assert that lesbian and gay Christians are a distinct group who have at least some awareness that they are forging a unique response to their predicament. It must be noted, however, that, at least initially the responses to this predicament are local and individual. In this regard, the convergence of responses into similar themes is sociologically noteworthy.

In this paper, I am particularly interested in the content of the themes that lesbian and gay Christians have articulated. As I note in the concluding section, it is the expression of these themes and the performance of a queer Christianity within congregations that creates a critical mass, or groundswell, that can be interpreted as a particular form of queer Christian religious movement. In other words, none of the individuals in this project started out with an inclination to reform religion or to make a socio-political statement. Rather, each was primarily interested in the question of (re)integrating within a Christian community. Given this context, meaningful research questions include: how do lesbian and gay Christians make sense of and manage their predicament? What motivates their involvement in a system of meaning from which they have been spun off, socially and spiritually? What (if any) source of (re)integration do they articulate for themselves?

Raison d'être

Despite the threats of damnation and rejection among other queers, lesbian and gay Christians remain undaunted in their commitment to both a queer identity and Christian religiosity. Each of the 42 lesbian and gay Christians that I interviewed described having a sense of deep spirituality. Many of them offered details of what they felt to be an 'early sense of vocation.' As one interviewee phrased it, 'religion has always been a natural and necessary part of existence for me.'

At the same time, lesbian and gay Christians recognise that these proclamations of Christian spirituality put them at odds with other queers. Detailed statements about religious conviction are usually accompanied by accounts of having to defend this spirituality as a 'thoughtful, meaningful enterprise and not some sort of brain-numbing self-denial' (Sean). He continues, 'When I see it

through the eyes of other gays, I often wonder if my religiosity is a character flaw.'

Each of the interviewees articulated an awareness of a secular hegemony in this culture ('educated professional people in general are often embarrassed about their spiritual leanings'). To be religious in a secular society is a struggle. To be religious and queer is to expect ongoing struggle. The theme of struggle is constant throughout my own interviews, in my ethnographic participation in various congregations and in related writings.

The theme of struggle is also familiar and persistent throughout Christian doctrine and teachings. For example, in the Catechism, persons are instructed that appropriate sexual behavior (chastity) is an 'apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom' (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994: 562). This mastery (which culminates in sexual expression contained within a marriage blessed by the Church) will bring happiness and fulfillment. Failure to achieve it will lead to enslavement by the passions. 'Struggle' may be a definitive trope of Christianity itself. Certainly one of the religion's most enduring themes is that persons will confront challenges and afflictions. The implied lesson is that the way they handle these struggles shapes their character. In this regard, lesbian and gay Christians can be seen as playing out a variation on an old theme: the contradiction of spirituality and sexuality is their particular struggle; the manner in which they engage the struggle defines their character. Struggle is paramount in each of the three responses to the 'gay predicament'—struggle to reinterpret or renounce a dominant system of meaning; struggle to suppress and hide homosexual desire. A common distinction among the lesbian and gay Christians in this study is the extent to which struggle with a contradiction is a definitive aspect of self-understanding and identification (cf. White and White 2004). Two themes in particular emerged from my interviews and observations. First, wrestling the contradiction of spirituality and sexuality defines the self-proclaimed lesbian or gay Christian. Second is the sense among them that they are better Christians—indeed, better persons—as a consequence of this struggle. In other words, the struggle is the crucible in which their character is forged.

Articulating the Self as a Process of Contradiction

There is a version of social psychology that suggests the 'articulated self' develops through the process of managing tensions and contradictions in aspects of life that the person considers most meaningful. In my own work I make the claim that the 'self' can be usefully defined in terms of this process. In other words, the ways in which we make sense of and manage these contradictions are the definitive features of the social self (O'Brien 2001a). One common experience among the persons I interviewed was an early awakening of both spirituality and homosexuality.¹⁴ Several participants indicated that their awareness of both their spirituality and their homosexuality was simultaneous. For

each of them this was a profound realisation, and one that was followed almost immediately by a sense of dread and panic:

I was about 14 or so. I had this heightened sense that I was very special. Very spiritual. God has something special in mind for me. At the same time I had this sense of myself as sexual and that felt so good and so right. And then it occurred to me that these two feelings didn't fit and were going to get me into big trouble. That's when I started trying to figure out what God wanted with me. What was this struggle supposed to teach me? I was really a mess about it for a long time. I think I have some answers now. But I still struggle with it every day. (Jim)

Fortunato remarks that it is 'no surprise that gay people ask an inordinate number of spiritual questions.' For those who fit comfortably within an accepted system of meaning such as Christianity, the extent to which they think about their spirituality is probably in terms of some benign Sunday school lesson, or perhaps something that is mildly comforting in times of need.¹⁵ Christians who have acknowledged their homosexuality do not have the luxury of semi-conscious spirituality. The discovery that one's sexuality is so deeply contradictory 'requires awakening levels of consciousness far beyond those necessary for straight people' (Fortunato 1982, 39). Thus, lesbian and gay Christians may have a more articulated sense of what it means to be a Christian precisely because they have to make ongoing sense of deeply felt contradictions.

For the most part this struggle for articulation is seen as positive and definitive. Every interviewee remarked in some way or another that her/his core sense of being was shaped significantly by the struggle to reconcile homosexuality and religiosity. Comments such as 'I wouldn't be me if I didn't have this struggle' were typical.

This is what has forged me, my defining battle. I'd probably be a very conservative evangelical Christian if I wasn't gay—everything is different as a result, especially my spirituality. Wrestling this marginality has become the thing that shapes me more than anything else. (Jim)

For these individuals, self-understanding comes through the process of engaging with persistent contradiction. The experience of contradiction is ongoing, both in conversations with oneself and in interactions with others. Lesbian and gay Christians constantly find themselves in situations in which they must explain (and often defend) their seemingly contradictory statuses to others. This experience is seen both as an occasion that can be tiresome and also as an occasion for growth and self-articulation. As one lesbian Baptist put it:

You can never take yourself for granted. If I go to an event with lesbians and somehow it comes up that I'm an assistant pastor, I have to listen to this barrage of criticism about the history of Christianity and what it's done to us. I get soooo tired of that. What's amazing is that it never seems to occur to them that maybe I've thought about this. Maybe I have compli-

cated reasons for being who I am. But they don't ask. As tiresome as it can be, it's still a good experience for me. I tend to go home and ask myself, why are you doing this? And I find that I understand my own answers better and better. Does that make any sense? (Carol)

Or this comment from a gay Methodist:

It's like coming out over and over again. Every time someone new joins [the congregation] we're going to go through the same ol' dance about how the Sunday School coordinator is this gay guy. Thankfully, I'm so well-known now that the other members warn the newcomers. But there's always someone who wants to bait you, y'know, corner you at a social or something and quiz you on doctrine. Like they know doctrine! ... I wanted to be able to scoff at their ignorance. The funny thing is, now that I know what I do, it turns out I want to educate them instead of show them up. I guess this whole thing has made me much more conscious of being a good Christian. (Mark)

This comment is from a student of Theology and Ministry:

It seems like everyday, everywhere I go I'm a problem for somebody. It's a problem for white America that I'm black. It's a problem for gay America that I'm in the ministry. It's a problem for the ministry—a big, big problem—that I'm gay. Always a problem. Weird thing is, and you might think this is funny, but being a problem has made me really strong. I mean, as a person. I'm always having to think about who I am and not let it get to me. That makes you strong in yourself. You really know who you are. (Everett)

Another common feature in these narratives is the prevalence of contradiction.

These experiences are similar in tone and expression to some of the narrative reflections on multiple consciousness (for example, Anzaldúa 1987). Persons who occupy contradictory social positions find themselves traversing the boundaries, or borders of multiple worlds. In so doing they develop a consciousness that reflects their marginal position. Persons in such positions usually have a heightened awareness of their own marginality; they are also more likely to be critically aware of expressions and practices that less marginalised persons take for granted. Most individuals perceive this heightened awareness as an advantage. At the very least, as noted in the illustrative quotes, contradictory positions are an occasion for reflection and articulation.

A significant outcome of these reflections among lesbian and gay Christians is the articulation of contradiction itself as useful and worthwhile in the shaping of a Christian identity. Not only is contradiction a catalyst for self-reflection, but ultimately it is a source of challenge for Christian congregations. Lesbians and gays who denounce Christianity and leave often make sense of their departure by recognising that their religion is 'too small' to accept 'the likes

of me.' This (re)conception of the church and/or God as being too small to accommodate difference is a common basis for renouncing religious affiliation among lesbians and gays. Among those who remain (or become) active participants in their religious communities, there is a slightly different and highly significant twist to this discourse. The strands of this twist include the articulation of the theme that 'my gay presence in this too small church is an opportunity for members to stretch their own limits of love and acceptance' and the even more radical notion, 'homosexuality is a gift from God.' The articulation and convergence of this uniquely queer response to Christianity is the subject of the next section.

Articulating a Queer Christian Identity

Biography and faith traditions intersect to produce discursive strategies toward religion. (Wade Clark Roof)

Homosexuality is a gift from God. (John McNeill, formerly of the Society of Jesus)

In the foregoing comments I have suggested that lesbian and gay Christians are aware that they occupy a unique, marginal and contradictory position with regard to fellow (heterosexual or closeted) Christians and to (former-Christian or non-Christian) lesbians and gays. This contradiction is experienced as a source of insight and as an occasion for articulating a self that these individuals perceive as stronger, more purposeful and, in many cases, indicative of the true meaning of Christianity. In other words, I suggest that rather than attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction of being queer and Christian, these individuals see 'living the contradiction' as a purpose in itself, a *raison d'être*.

One additional theme that emerged from my conversations with lesbian and gay Christians is this: 'my contradictory presence is good for the Church.' This revision of the discourse on homosexuality (from problem to useful challenge) serves to reintegrate the homosexual into Christianity (at least in terms of her/his personal articulation of the religion). Further, it renders the homosexual a sort of modern-day crucible with which Christianity must grapple. In doing so, mainline Christian denominations must revisit and redefine the message of love and redemption. In this regard, lesbian and gay Christians redefine 'affliction' as an ability; the ability to embrace contradiction and ambiguity is articulated as a manifestation of Christian goodness and character.

This articulation can be interpreted in terms of Roof's thesis, as quoted earlier. Individuals enter into a 'creative dialogue with tradition' and articulate discursive strategies that enable them to retain significant (often contradictory) aspects of self while maintaining religious commitments.¹⁶ In this instance, the homosexual biography intersects with familiar aspects of Christianity—faith in God's divine wisdom, acceptance of challenge, struggle, oppression, awakening and rebirth—to produce a particularly queer discursive response toward religion.

The lesbian and gay Christians who took part in my research, as well as those interviewed by Wilcox (2000), are a unique group in that they have not rejected religion altogether, nor have they accepted the terms of a 'divinely ordered closet' (i.e. donning the cloak of shame and silence in order to maintain Christian commitments and status). Instead, they have articulated a position that can be interpreted as a unique queer Christian identity. This identity merges elements of essentialist reasoning, Christian doctrines of love and acceptance, Christian histories of oppression, and collective struggle to attain godly virtues. The emergence of a common discourse among individuals who are, for the most part, engaged in solitary struggle, is noteworthy. I attribute this emergent queer Christian discourse, in its initial phases, to the common threads in Christianity generally. In articulating a queer Christianity, lesbians and gays take up similar threads regarding the formation of identity and their position within their congregations.

The most common theme I heard among both the lesbian and gay Christians I came to know and the congregants who fully accepted them was that we are 'all God's children.' A point of reconciliation with one's homosexuality and Christianity seems to be the acknowledgement that 'God created me; He must have created me this way for a reason.' This 'realization' is marked by many lesbian and gay Christians as a turning point: 'All of a sudden it hit me, I believe in God, I believe He is perfect and has created a perfect world. Why would I have these desires if they weren't part of a perfect plan?' Or as one lesbian pastor phrased it, 'Yes I've been reborn through my faith in God's love. Turns out I was born queer.'¹⁷

Coupled with the theme of struggle, this discourse becomes a narrative whereby homosexuality is 'both a gift and my cross to bear.' In this regard, homosexuality becomes a personal crucible for forging character. This discourse is buttressed by the Christian belief that God creates everything for a purpose. The good Christian's task is to nurture faith in God and to live out the purpose evident in her/his own creation—in this case, the creation of homosexuality. Queer Christians find doctrinal support for their homosexuality in the principle, 'God is love.' A loving God loves and accepts all Her/His creations; a Church founded on these principles must make room for all that God has created and loves. From this thread comes the idea that a Church is only as big as its god, and its god is only as big as the extent of her/his love. Thus, a truly Christian church is a church that is big enough to love and accept homosexual members.

The third and most critical thread in this discourse combines with the others to weave the theme whereby the homosexual is a necessary and useful challenge for contemporary Christianity. In the words of former Jesuit and self-declared gay liberation theologian John McNeill, 'God is calling us to play an historical role' (1996, p. 192). This role is to extend to Christian congregations and denominations the challenge of stretching to accept all who enter and wish to belong—in short, to become as big as God's love, which is infinite. This

discourse reclaims the proverbial phrase, 'love the sinner but hate the sin,' but it reframes sin as failure to love and accept all God's creations. In this conceptualisation, God and Christianity *per se* are not the problem; rather, the problem is the institution through which God's intent is interpreted. In the words of a gay Methodist minister, 'I never had any doubts about my relationship with God. It's the church that's been a problem for me.' Thus, the institution of Christianity becomes the problem and lesbian and gay Christians become the chosen few whose special calling it is to redeem institutional Christianity by liberating its narrowly defined god.

Articulating a queer Christian identity involves transforming a discourse of shame and silence (with the promise of exile) into a narrative of pride and expression. For lesbian and gay Christians, pride is based on a belief that homosexuality has a place in God's plan. The particular place at this particular moment in history is to foment Christian renewal and reformation. In this way, lesbian and gay Christians manage their original predicament by renaming themselves and their positions within their congregations in terms of a gay Christian activism. This discursive strategy is consistent with both lesbian and gay social movements and a Christian tradition of faith-based struggle and martyrdom. It elevates the homosexual from a position of 'irredeemable problem' to one of 'path to redemption.' In this particular instance, it is institutional Christianity that is in need of redemption. Just as the individual must struggle in order to grow and to achieve character and, ultimately, exaltation, so too must the institution of Christianity struggle. The 'latter-day homosexual' is the occasion for this institutional metamorphosis. Within this discourse, lesbian and gay Christians become both modern-day Christian soldiers and sacrificial lambs.

Implications

In this concluding section I suggest some of the implications of a queer Christian identity with regard to a queer Christian movement. The fullness of the phenomenon that some have referred to as 'the queering of Christianity' is best understood in terms of separate but mutually constitutive fields of relations: individual, communal, organisational, and ideological. My focus in this article is the ways in which individuals who choose to remain in mainstream Christian denominations while being out about their sexuality make sense of and manage the presumed discontinuity of homosexuality and Christianity. For the persons in this study, the journey from feeling ashamed of their sexuality and betrayed by God to articulating a strong queer Christian identity was mostly solitary. Once they achieved this queer Christian identity they became aware that there were many others who shared similar histories.¹⁸

In this conclusion, I want to discuss briefly some of the shifts taking place at various analytical levels as a consequence of what I would term a social movement within the pews. There are several noteworthy developments, includ-

ing the proliferation of queer Christian literatures and websites (for example, Stuart 1997; Tigert 1997; see also www.lesbianchristians.com), as well as literatures that attempt to identify, define and 'authorize a specifically gay, lesbian, or queer "spirituality" as an alternative to the restrictions of "organized religion"' (Comstock 1997, 11). Here I address two areas: congregational communities and theology. Another equally noteworthy battle is being waged at the organisational/denominational level. Space does not permit me to comment on this level here (see Hartman 1996).

Congregational Communities

The presence of open lesbians and gays who are active participants in Christian congregations poses tensions and contradictions for their religious communities. Much of my own ethnographic research centers on the responses of congregants to the presence of lesbian and gay members. There is much more complexity in these congregational deliberations than the existing literature indicates (much of this literature assumes, uncritically, a simple, antagonistic dichotomy between straight and queer Christians). Queer Christians who consider themselves a source of challenge for their Christian communities are often correct in this understanding. Numerous Christian congregations throughout the United States, British Columbia and Great Britain¹⁹ have issued formal statements of 'inclusion and affirmation' of lesbian and gay members. In most cases, the creation of these documents, and the position of acceptance implied, has involved considerable debate among members of the congregations.

Significant numbers of members leave a particular parish or congregation because of its acceptance of openly homosexual members (e.g. the outcry among church members whose ministers perform 'gay' wedding ceremonies). Equally significant, but less often discussed, are those who leave a congregation because of its intolerance toward lesbian and gay members. In my research I encountered several heterosexual Catholics and Protestants who had explicitly sought out 'open and affirming' churches after experiencing a 'crisis of faith' in observing the intolerance of their previous congregations.²⁰ For some churchgoers, an 'open and affirming' marquee is a positive indication that the church also espouses other 'liberal' values.

The process whereby congregations come to terms with openly gay and lesbian members is varied and complex. In some instances, anti-gay activism in the region serves as a catalyst to galvanise support for lesbians and gays. For instance, one Seattle area church notes in the letter announcing its vote 'unanimously to become open and affirming' that the final impetus for this vote was a visit to the city by anti-gay activist Fred Phelps. With a gleeful aside the letter states, 'Pssst ... don't tell Fred Phelps that his presence here only served to solidify our support of becoming Open & Affirming on this Lord's Day' (Cornell-Drury 2000). The AIDS epidemic has also forced a focus on members who are in need of the church's services and ministries, many of whom are gay men. In his

book, *AIDS, Gays and the American Catholic Church*, Richard Smith (1994) chronicles the elaborate debates that have taken place among American Catholic priests in determining how best to respond to the AIDS crisis. The creation of Catholic AIDS ministries, many of which are staffed by lay Catholics who are themselves gay and living with AIDS, has brought homosexuality directly into the parishes in a way that cannot be ignored.

These events are noteworthy but should not overshadow the everyday presence of, and interactions that take place between, church members. Repeatedly I heard stories from 'straight' members who had struggled with their own definition of Christianity and how best to respond to lesbian and gay members. These narratives converge around similar themes, especially the theme that God is 'unconditional love.' For many of these Christians, a lesbian and gay presence in the church truly is an occasion to examine the meaning of Christianity and how best to 'live' it. For individual members, as well as entire congregations, this is a long and difficult process. For example, Seattle First Christian states in its letter of affirmation notes that 'this is the culmination of three years of listening, dialogue, discernment and unconditional love ... [this statement] is indeed a work of faith' (Cornell-Drury 2000). My observation is that there is a growing movement taking place within congregational pews (in addition to the polls and in legislative arenas). This movement is being shaped by the presence of lesbian and gay members, the contradiction they force upon the community, and the discursive strategies that emerge as a way to manage this community-level contradiction. As congregations struggle to manage this contradiction and to articulate their own positions, they are responding more and more to aspects of queer Christian theology. It is possible that this occurrence is also creating more opportunities for placement of lesbian and gay clergy in mainstream congregations. Again, the effects are mutually constitutive and should be studied as such.

Theology

What are the ideological consequences of a gay and lesbian presence in mainstream Christianity? I have suggested that lesbian and gay Christians are authoring a historically specific queer religiosity to make sense of their predicament of exclusion. This queer Christianity is likely to have transformative effects at the individual, community and organisational levels—all of which are mutually constitutive. Similarly, there are implications for Christian ideologies as well. I offer the following as preliminary observations. Whether one is in agreement with it or not, the articulation of a queer Christian theology, especially as it has emerged within the ranks of individuals trying to make sense of their own contradiction, has implications.

Queer Christian theologies resituate and redefine the parameters for discussions of sexuality and morality. Regardless of one's views, the conversation is different as a consequence of acknowledging homosexuality. Another significant implication is the authoring of a 'gay liberation theology' whereby

homosexuality is identified as a gift from God. Again, regardless of whether one agrees, this particular discourse is already leading to a re-examination in many denominations of what it means to say that theology should be a 'living guide' that reflects its times.

In my own assessment, one of the most noteworthy ideological considerations is the implication of focusing on 'unconditional love' as a discursive strategy for accepting and affirming a homosexual presence. Concerning the case of homosexuality, the belief that 'god is love' sits in tension with the notion of a patriarchal god who, like the unchallenged parent, sets down rules that are not to be questioned. An ideology of unconditional love implies a love that is growing and stretching; a love that is manifest among members of a community who interpret for themselves the extent and expression of this love. This is a longstanding tension in Christian theology. Deliberations regarding homosexuality that are framed in terms of 'god's unconditional love' tip the equation one degree further toward a rendering of a Christian god who is not an anthropomorphic figure handing down his particular rules. Rather, this god is an expression of agreement and affirmation among a collective body united in spirit and intent. In short, 'god' becomes the extent of the community's expression of love. The larger the reach of the group's love, the bigger their god.

A Final Note Regarding Oppositional Consciousness

In an attempt to explain lesbian and gay involvement in Christian organizations, some lesbian and gay political activists have suggested that religion is one of the 'last citadels' of gay oppression (see Hartman 1996 for a review). These observers see the struggle for inclusion in mainstream religions as a final step toward attaining cultural and political acceptance. In this literature, lesbian and gay Christian involvement is interpreted as a form of political expression whereby queers are taking on traditional homophobia by acting from within. This thesis presumes an 'oppositional consciousness' (Mansbridge 2001) that conflates outcomes (religious reform) with motivation and presumes a motivation (desire to reform religion) that is not necessarily reflective of the actual experiences of lesbian and gay Christians. My research suggests that there are several stages in self-awareness and articulation that occur before any form of 'oppositional consciousness' develops among lesbian and gay Christians. To the extent that such a consciousness is developing, I suggest that it is historically unique and should be understood within the context in which it is developing. Specifically, the motivation should be understood in terms of the homosexual Christian's desire for self-understanding in Christian terms and reintegration into a system of meaning from which he/she has been cast off.

Sociological theses such as Mansbridge's 'oppositional consciousness' or Roof's 'creative dialogue' are useful in providing a general framework of analysis, but they miss the mark in interpreting motivations and commitments. Roof's thesis is intended to explain what he views as a 'shopping' mentality regarding

contemporary religion, in which the individual shops around in search of a congregation or denomination that fits personal needs. Queer Christian identities appear to be motivated more by the desire for (re)integration within Christian traditions, at which point the individual may begin to 'shop' for a welcoming congregation. Similarly, while it is certainly possible to view the growing lesbian and gay visibility within Christian organisations as a manifestation of 'oppositional consciousness,' I think it would be inaccurate and misleading to assume a political motivation for this involvement. An intended contribution of this study is to make clear that lesbian and gay Christian participation (and related activism) must be understood on its own terms, in its own context and in terms of the particular historical moment.

Notes

1. The emergence of businesses, such as GayMart USA, is indicative of both a commodification and a homogenisation of 'gay culture.' See, for example, *Homo Economics* (Gluckman and Reed 1997).
2. The inclusion of this group is highly controversial for many lesbian and gay events.
3. In this paper I use the phrase 'lesbian and gay' because it is the most accurate description of the group about which I am writing. The term lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) is politically strategic and meaningful, but often not descriptively accurate in specific case studies.
4. Several colleagues and interviewees have indicated that the experiences of Jewish lesbians and gays are similar. In this project, I have maintained a focus on mainstream Christian denominations because of my familiarity with Christian theology. For studies in Jewish queer experience, see Schneer and Aviv (2002) and Balka and Rose (1991).
5. During the course of my formal research, Seattle First Baptist was one of a handful of recent Baptist denominations in the United States that were threatened with revocation of their charter for affirming lesbian and gay membership. Other congregations that were the spiritual homes to several of my interviewees struggled with similar tensions within their denominational organisations, especially congregations attempting to appoint lesbian and gay ministers and those that supported standing ministers who had recently 'come out' to the congregation.
6. This ethnography is limited, especially in what it suggests regarding variations of gender, race and geography on the articulation of and circumstances surrounding a queer Christian identity. I expect that there are significant variations in terms of the dimensions of gender and race, and I suspect these interact differently in different geographical regions. This study highlights one variation on the theme of individual reconciliation of homosexuality and Christianity. It should be read in terms of what it can suggest for further research regarding different variations on this theme.

7. There is a notable historical correlation between gay political movements, Christian denominations' heightened discussion of the 'homosexual question'—including the revision of the Catechism—and the removal of 'homosexuality' as a category of pathology in the 1974 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* used by the American Psychiatric Association to identify and diagnose psychological disorders.
8. Article Six, section 2359: 'Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection' (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, 566).
9. This explanation is consistent with a social psychological literature demonstrating that dominant belief systems are usually not rejected in the face of contradiction. Rather, individuals attempt to make sense of the contradictions through 'secondary elaborations' (Mehan and Wood 1975, 197). The motivation for continued engagement in the belief system is the desire to maintain a coherent system of meaning regarding the meaning and purpose of one's life. Even problematic positions within the system of meaning can be less threatening than having no sense of meaning or basis for self-understanding. This literature can be used to explain seemingly incomprehensible behavior such as attendance at one's own 'degradation ceremony' (e.g. the Mormon who participates in her/his own excommunication process).
10. Stuart also points out the similarities with other Christians, such as Christian feminists or Christian ecologists, who must also explain and justify their religious commitments.
11. Religious individualism as articulated by Roof is a process whereby persons seek individual paths of spiritual fulfillment. In this modern religious turn, individuals select among an array of churches and spiritual paths to fulfill personal needs. Roof and others have referred to this process as a form of religious 'shopping' whereby religion is seen in terms of personal enhancement (what does this church do for me?) rather than as a form of traditional community obligation.
12. I am not implying that these responses are mutually exclusive or fixed. Rather, it is probable that during the course of a queer Christian career individuals try on aspects of each of these responses. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop an explanation for primary self-expression through one response or another—a settling in to a particular expression of identity. I assume that various reference groups play a part in this process and that, over time, the proliferation of an articulated queer Christianity will in itself serve as one such point of reference for a new generation of queer youth. I offer some suggestions toward such an explanation in the conclusions.
13. All quotes from subjects used in this article are intended to be illustrative (rather than analytically definitive). For this reason I do not give detailed subject descriptions. These descriptions are available on request. All of the

interviewees in this study elected to use their real names. For reasons of 'voice' this is my preferred ethnographical practice.

14. Although nothing conclusive can be ascertained from my few interviews, this phenomenon of simultaneous awakening of homosexuality and spiritual vocation may be more prevalent among young men. Nineteen of the 25 men I interviewed spoke of this experience. Only two of the women mentioned a similar feeling. In fact, the women tended to develop a strong sense of spirituality and desire for religious involvement sometime after coming to terms with their homosexuality. Two of the men offered an explanation of their early sense of vocation as being a means of making them feel better about their homosexuality. As one put it, 'God wouldn't have made me this way if he didn't have something special in mind for my life.' Another noted that he considered his experience somewhat normal 'for someone who was meant to be a priest ... after all, aren't all priests supposed to be gay? I figured that my attraction to men, including one of the teachers at my [Catholic] school, was just God's way of making it clear that I was meant to be a priest.'
15. Evangelicalism is another domain of Christianity whose members experience struggle and are likely to view this struggle as a definitive aspect of themselves and their religious commitment. Smith, C. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
16. For another interesting example, see Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez's (2004) study of Catholic Mexican immigrant women and their sex lives.
17. In the past two decades, many lesbian and gay Christians embraced the hypothesis that homosexuality is genetic rather than socially determined. This essentialist position was consistent with the idea that if homosexuality exists, God must have intended it. Catholicism has accepted the essentialist proposition of biological determinism explicitly without accepting the corollary that homosexuality is a positive characteristic. The latter is the queer twist on the essentialist proposition. But belonging to a denomination that accepted the initial proposition made it easier to make the case for the possible goodness and purpose of homosexuality. Other denominations, notably Mormonism, state explicitly that homosexuality is a 'lifestyle choice' that a person should resist by every possible means, no matter how strong the inclination. For a discussion of the intersection of essentialist and constructionist reasoning within Christian considerations of sexuality, see Boswell (1997).
18. The persons in my study range in age from 27 to 63 years. It is likely that a younger generation of lesbian and gay youth are discovering the existence of a queer Christianity in community rather than in isolation.
19. In England, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement is considered to be the single largest LGBT movement in the country (Gill 1998).
20. During this research process I gave a talk at a Baptist church and mentioned that I had been raised as a Mormon. Afterward a married couple approached me and remarked that they had left a Presbyterian church and joined this congregation because of its acceptance of homosexuality. Before joining this particular church, they had not known 'anyone who is gay,' but they had

'grave concerns' about a Christian church that would be so exclusive. After hearing this, I was somewhat surprised when they continued with a question for me. What they really wanted to know was whether Mormons were as bad as they had been led to believe. Their daughter had recently begun dating a Mormon man and they were quite overwrought about this.

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