For the Love of God: Themes from Interviews Regarding Religious Students' Beliefs on LGBTQ+ Issues

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Abstract

The following essay is a segment of a larger BPhil defense centered around 15 interviews conducted with college students who self-identified as religious, all of whom were either Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. The participants were asked a series of questions in one-on-one interviews with a researcher, delving into their religious practices, backgrounds, and beliefs, alongside questions on political identity specifically focused on perceptions of LGBTQ+ people and issues. Given the recent political discussions centered around LGBTQ+ identities and religious ideals, this paper seeks to highlight the perspectives of young people who are a part of religious communities. The scope is set to the University of Pittsburgh's student body, and themes of these interviews include hope for greater inclusion, nonjudgment as a guiding principle of faith, and the idea of community as a tool for both religious and LGBTQ+ people.

Introduction

This paper is devoted to exploring common themes from the 15 interviews conducted in Spring 2024. During this thesis excerpt, LGBTQ+ will be defined by the definition provided by The Center, a New York-based community organization for queer people. The Center defines LGBTQ+ as "an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer […] used to describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity." While each person had their own understanding of faith, religion, and the place for the LGBTQ+ community, there were several similarities between participants, even between those of different religions or political ideologies. Some themes I noticed include the "I'm not an expert" dilemma, the importance of community, the value of respect, love, and nonjudgment, and the complexity of dialogues on the LGBTQ+ with members of their own religious communities, as well as those outside of their faith communities.

The "I'm not an Expert" Dilemma

During all 15 interviews for this study, almost every single participant said something to the effect of "I can't speak to that" or "well, I'm no expert" to the point that it warranted its own subsection as a theme of the interviews. Answers that include phrases such as "I think" or "I may be wrong" seem to suggest that religious students feel the need to dampen their credibility on the topic of religious belief.

A Perceived Lack of Knowledge on Specific Issues

The first factor in participants' hesitancy to claim expertise was a perceived lack of understanding of certain, more niche topics in their religious life. Participants would state "I'm not as well researched in this area as I'd like to be" when asked questions about specific scriptures or rules that addressed LGBTQ+ issues. When explaining the gendering of roles in Muslim society, one participant explained, "I'm not really good at explaining this [concept]. It seems like a very abstract concept nowadays, but I personally think there is some truth to [the heterosexual model of gendered interaction]." This participant went on to explain that even though the idea of gender is more malleable in modern society, they believed that there was an aspect of truth to the Muslim principles of the traditional gender binary; men and women are inherently equals meant to balance each other, according to this participant, yet they didn't want to discount the modern discussions on a more flexible system of gender for those who are gender-nonconforming.

In many interviews, participants also noted that conversations about gender and sexuality, especially LGBTQ+ gender and sexuality, were not common within their religious communities or family units. These participants recalled unease around these topics due to their controversial subject matter, and they usually avoided these conversations with older members and leaders of their religious communities for fear of an argument or having to hear a position with which they fervently disagreed. Therefore, they shared a belief that they might not have been as knowledgeable about issues of LGBTQ+ acceptance in religious contexts due to their avoidance of the topic.

The Issue of Speaking on a Community To Which One Does Not Belong

Many also used "I'm not an expert" statements to denote that they were speaking about a different sect or denomination of their religion, or that they were speaking about a community to which they did not necessarily belong. When talking about the varying sects of Judaism, one Jewish participant said "I can't speak to orthodoxy because I'm not part of that community. I know that my sect is generally accepting of LGBTQ+ people, but I don't want to generalize because each sect is different." Another participant began to explain their perception of acceptance for LGBTQ+ people and how it seemed more accepting now to them, only to say "I don't think it's my place to say that actually. I take that back. I got lost in my own thoughts." This participant, who does not identify as LGBTQ+, expressed a concern that they did not have the authority to speak to LGBTQ+ acceptance or discrimination because they had never faced that discrimination themself.

The Avoidance of Stereotypes: A Specific Look at Islam

The "I'm not an expert" dilemma took on a new tone with participants who identified as Muslim; there was a pervasive fear on the part of participants not to say anything that could be misconstrued as a harmful of the Muslim community or the religion of Islam. Participant 11, who identifies as Muslim, articulated their fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes of both those who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who are Muslim through their answers to the interview questions. When asked what stereotypes they were trying to avoid, Participant 11 shared their experience as a Muslim in the modern United States and abroad:

> Since 9/11, there has been a large rise in Islamophobia in the United States because the attacks were believed to be by some big, evil Muslim group that wanted to kill everybody. The word terrorist is often associated with the religion of Islam, and people who don't know anything about Islam are going to believe the first thing that they hear from the media. It's really unfortunate. I mean, you take a group like the KKK, and they also commit terrorist acts but you don't see Christianity being pictured as a terrorist group on the media.

This fear of confirming negative stereotypes is often present across all demographics, and specifically minoritized populations like Muslims, Jewish people, queer people, people of color, and other groups that face systemic discrimination. Coined by researchers Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, "stereotype threat" is the constant consideration of the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about a person's ethnic, racial, gender, or cultural group (2011). With a minoritized position comes the mental toll of constantly worrying about one's public image; one has to be careful to avoid confirming what the mainstream public assumes about a cultural identity so as to not perpetuate that stereotype and oppression. Another Muslim participant, Participant 6, expressed a similar fear:

> The idea that this is being recorded is terrifying, just so you know. One of the fears that I had going into this study was the idea of misrepresenting my religion and painting it in a negative

light, because again, there's no need for that to happen. I think the media does enough to demonize my religion already, and I don't know what other people will say.

In speaking on this fear, Participant 6 emphasized that they do not speak for the entire Muslim community. "I am one person," they said. "I'm not a [religious] scholar. I could have said something that was completely wrong and that is on me and no one else." In this quote, Participant 6 combines many of the ideas in this section: their lack of status as scholar, their placement as a member of a certain sect of Islam who is unable to speak for all sects, and their fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes. They do not claim to be an expert and believe that it would be unfair to take their beliefs and assume that all Muslim people think in a similar manner. When speaking about how their faith called them to engage in this stereotype threat and move past it, Participant 6 stated "If I've said anything right, that is on God, and if I have said anything wrong, that's on me and only me." According to Participant 6, they believed that their words were to be taken as meaningful in the context of being one person's personal experience in the intersections of faith and sexuality, not as a blanket statement for all of the Muslim community. If Participant 6 said anything that was truthful or right, God was the one guiding them to say it. If, however, they said anything that was fallacious or wrong, it was their own human error that caused that misbelief.

The fear of falling into stereotypes becomes that much more acute when considering that their mistakes may impact how people understand an entity as nebulous and enormous as God or religion, and Participant 6, along with several other participants of all backgrounds, would expect readers to understand that as humans, their perspectives may not fully reflect God and are just as fallible as any other person's opinions. Many participants, however, also took this as an opportunity to do the exact opposite: to correct the record and represent a new view of their religion(s) that the broader public may not have considered. Participant 11 was particularly interested in their efforts to provide a new look on religious issues, stating that "a lot of things that have been said publicly are from a standpoint that isn't religious, and I see this as my opportunity to kind of rectify that." While there was certainly fear around misrepresentation, some participants saw this interview as a way to deconstruct the ideas of those that public media take to be "experts" on religious issues, whether that be politicians of faith, religious leaders, or media pundits who express views as though they were universal in their religion.

While this idea of stereotype threat did not manifest itself directly in the words of Jewish participants, it is likely that students of both minoritized religions included in this study (Judaism and Islam) felt a similar concern around validating anti-Semitic or Islamophobic stereotypes, even if these stereotypes are different for each religion. As a researcher who is Christian, participants of minoritized religions may have had concerns that I, as a non-Jewish or non-Muslim person, would judge or misunderstand their responses. My positionality as a queer Christian may have subliminally created a research environment where the threat of stereotypes was more prevalent than an environment with a researcher of the same religion. While I never directly mentioned my religious identity nor my queerness unless the participant asked themself, their perception of my positionality may have presented a challenge to a comfortable research environment.

The Value of Community for Religious Students

The second theme to arise from the interviews was the value of community for religious students. Community came up as an answer to several questions, yet it often arose when participants were asked "What do you feel are the guiding principles/basic elements of your faith?" near the middle of the interview. This question came after a discussion about important rituals, texts, and stories that they felt were central to their faith. The participants identified which out of their religions' principles they felt were central to their religious experience or faith, and those who listed community as a key principle (around half of participants) all listed community as a central tenant of their faith.

The Ideal and Hope for Community When Considering LGBTQ+ People

When discussing the importance of community in their religion, several participants stated that they knew that many faith groups did not provide this sense of community to all members. Many participants noted that exclusion of certain people, i.e. queer people, led to an inequal access to the benefits of faith community and fellowship. With this acknowledgement often came the hope that faith groups could and would do more to be welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. As one Jewish participant stated, "When faith is done right, it's supposed to be something that brings people together." The sentiment of bringing people together to allow more people access to the benefits of religion was often mentioned in conjunction with the sentiment that community is central to their faith experience. Several Jewish and Muslim participants mentioned that because community was so vital to the mental and emotional health of minoritized religions, it was necessary to provide all religious people, regardless of other identities, a "safe space [with] a community to rely on," as one participant said. This participant then explained how they viewed the importance of accepting communities through a lens of scripture:

> I view [my religion] and the scriptures within it like the Quran and the Sunnahs of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) as kind of a guiding way of how you should live your life. If you have any questions or concerns, the answer to that will be in the Quran and that's its entire purpose. It gives you perspective on how to view the world, and a lot of that perspective comes from having a very community-oriented approach. And that being very open and accepting of the people around you and being willing to humble yourself [is important].

To this participant, and many others that were interviewed, the importance of community was central to their religions' teachings and beliefs, and to deny that to certain people based on LGBTQ+ identity was deeply wrong and ultimately harmful. Those who were members of minoritized religions were especially focused on the importance of communities, but these sentiments appeared in interviews with members of all three Abrahamic religions. Despite their differing opinions on the sinfulness or morality of LGBTQ+ identity, many participants emphasized the need for open communities to welcome LGBTQ+ people into the religion without judgment, for both the sake of that LGBTQ+ person and the religious community at large.

Practices That Foster Community as Central to Faith Experience

Community was a value that participants shared as central to their engagement in various religious events, holidays, and other practices that involve celebrating one's religion with others. One Jewish participant, Participant 9, discussed how community played a role in celebrating the High Holidays and other events in the Hebrew calendar: "Chanukah, while not actually a really important holiday in the story of Judaism, is definitely the largest family holiday and fosters that sense of community." To Participant 9, every Jewish holiday provided an opportunity for family and friends to gather and commemorate their faith. This sense of community was incredibly valuable to Participant 9 because it allowed them a space to explore their faith identity, as well as connect with those close to them through meaningful worship and practice.

Other participants focused more on the community they found in weekly worship services and community events. One Catholic participant, Participant 8, discussed how weekly mass allowed them to connect with those who held the same religious identity. Participant 8 identified religious music and the use of music in worship as a key source of religious community for them. When discussing their various worship practices, Participant 8 said:

> I participate in the music ministry, which is a very community-based element of my faith. You have one person cantor, or lead, the service, but then the whole choir is working together behind them to support the service. And when one of us is ill or can't cantor, another will step up to fill the gaps. Even when you are cantoring, you are singing with the congregation, not at the congregation, and it feeds into this emphasis on community.

The practice of engaging with religious music in a communal setting helped to nurture Participant 8's faith and sense of religious belonging. "We attend mass and other events for that community," Participant 8 continued, "and it allows us to keep God's will in your everyday life." To Participant 8, and several other participants in this study, the value of community lies in the communal experience of faith. These participants found a support for their identity as a religious person in these religious communities, and they stated that this sense of community, or "fellowship" as some put it, was central to their experience with religion. Thus, if religious groups are not accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, queer people are shut out of the community practices that fundamentally shape how they connect with their religious beliefs.

Community as a Tool for Minoritized Religions

Another reason for the importance of community sprouted from the interviews of Jewish and Muslim students. Members of these groups named that because they identified with a religion that is consistently faced with hate and discrimination, the community they found within religious spaces was vital to their mental health and well-being. This concept of the necessity of community for minoritized groups is by no means new, inspiring researchers at all levels to study the impact of community on the mental well-being of minoritized groups. A study done in 2021 used symptoms of depression as a metric for mental health, and while the relationship between well-being and community is far more

complicated than one set of symptoms, the findings provide a compelling example of the benefits of community for those who face regular discrimination for their identities (Pachicano 2021).

Many participants mentioned that community allowed them to have access to a safe space to explore their religious beliefs where they knew the threat of violence and hatred was minimal. One Muslim participant shared that they had not been a diligent member of religious community groups prior to coming to college, but that once on campus, they found the support of these groups fundamental to their continued practice of Islam, as well as their well-being on a majority white, secular campus.

Other participants emphasized the importance of community involvement on a broader scale. One Jewish participant reflected on the legacies of violence and anti-Semitism by stating "because Judaism is an ethno-religion, we tend to stick together because people have tried to kill us. I can have drastically different political beliefs from my friends, but because we're Jewish, we already have that bond." This sentiment of bonds in faith that transcended other identities was echoed in several other interviews. Several participants, both Muslim and Jewish, said that the rising anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the United States and abroad had exacerbated the need for close-knit religious communities. "It's really confusing and weird and scary," one Jewish participant remarked, "so it's good to have a sense of community right now." For many participants, religious groups provided them a space of freedom from fear and harm, allowing them to explore and celebrate their religion without fear of retribution or violence. This value of community was essential in the eyes of the participants, not only to their relationship with religion but to their sense of well-being and self.

Having a religious community, especially for those of minoritized religious backgrounds, can be essential in creating a foundation for mental and emotional health; consequently, exclusion from these community spaces can deeply impact members of those religions who identify as LGBTQ+. Many LGBTQ+ participants in this study discussed the impact a religious community's level of acceptance can have on their mental health and sense of identity. Homophobic experiences caused several participants to struggle with doubt in their religious beliefs and negative mental health affects, while affirming congregations offered LGBTQ+ students opportunities to experience community support and gender affirmation through honest inclusion in religious spaces. Having access to affirming and tolerant spaces for religious LGBTQ+ people can provide them with additional mental health and community support, a sentiment most strongly echoed in the interviews with LGBTQ+ participants with marginalized religious identities.

"Who am I to Judge?": The Importance of Non-Judgment, Love, and Respect for Those Around Us

One of the most prevalent themes in these interviews was the idea that it was not the participant's place to judge. While this idea of non-judgment came up in almost every interview, there were different variants on why the participants though it was not their place to judge. Each participant that mentioned their belief in non-judgment had a combination of four subthemes that fall under the non-judgment umbrella: not caring, non-judgment from a place of love, a belief that someone's behavior is between them and God, and a principle of doing unto others as you wish would be done to you.

Honestly, Who Cares?

A sentiment of not caring if someone is queer often came up in conjunction with another subtheme of nonjudgement; if someone "didn't care," it often stemmed from a belief that they would not want to be judged that way, or that it was between that queer person and God, or that to love someone as God commanded was to not question or care about what they did in the privacy of their own relationships. This sentiment was often expressed by participants using the phrase "minding my own business," which was often used to convey a belief that it was better to make sure they themselves were following the rules of God or one's religion rather than policing others' behavior. When asked for their opinion on LGBTQ+ people, one Muslim participant responded, "I don't think I'm allowed to have a position on LGBTQ+ people honestly. They are just people, and everybody needs to mind their own business a little bit more."

When this participant was speaking, it was said with almost a tone of exasperation; they were frustrated that people were more concerned with the behavior of others than with their own misdeeds. This participant, along with many others, expressed a belief that it was better to work towards sinlessness internally than it was to restrict the behavior of others. This sentiment often came with a statement of blanket culpability in sin; "We all sin to one extent or another, right? No one here is perfect," claimed one participant. Not caring whether someone sinned often came with the belief that because everyone sinned at some point or another, human beings were not fit to be qualified or just judges. As Participant 10 put it, human beings were not inherently righteous and therefore could not be judges of what righteousness was.

The only time many participants said they cared about someone's behavior was if harm was being done. One participant stated that "[a]s long as I'm not causing harm to anyone and no one else is causing harm, I see no reason to do anything about it." As long as no one was being harmed, participants said that it really wasn't their place to intervene nor did they feel compelled to do anything. If harm was being done, such as in the case of non-consensual behaviors like sexual harassment, participants felt as though it was necessary to intervene. Otherwise, they simply didn't care. As one participant put it, "I highly doubt God cares who you like in your free time, so why should I?"

The only other situation in which participants felt as though someone's sexuality or gender identity was their business was for "context". When asked what one participant meant by their use of the word context, they explained that to them, "queer people are just people. The only reason the word queer is important to use is only so you don't minimize the struggles that they've had, the prejudice they face in society." This participant came from a minoritized religion, Islam, and mentioned on several occasions the shared nature of oppression between Muslim people and queer people. To know someone as queer, this participant argued, was only important in the way that knowing someone as Muslim was important; the knowledge provides context for understanding their behaviors and supporting them as members of a shared community. Other than for context, the identity did not matter to them. They simply "didn't care" beyond that.

Love Thy Neighbor

The first subtheme of non-judgment that emerged from the interviews was only prevalent in the responses of Christian research participants. This principle of "loving thy neighbor" is something that is quite prominent in public Christian discourse to the point that it is often a reference in modern secular culture as well. The original foundation for this idea is found in the Bible's Book of Matthew, verses 37-40:

> Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (1992)

While there are several different translations of these verses, the core concept remains the same: love God and love your fellow man. All participants of the Christian faith echoed this sentiment in some way, but each had their own interpretation of what "loving thy neighbor" actually meant. One participant stated that "As a person who thinks that religion should be rooted in love, I think everyone should be loved for who they are." Another defined this love for others as "treating everyone with respect." A third participant, Participant 8, stated that they felt that "even if you don't understand someone, you can still love and support them." Understanding did not equal love in the eyes of Participant 8, even if understanding was an ultimate goal; they echoed the ideas of love as respect for others and accepting other people for who they truly are that had been seen in previous interviews, yet Participant 8 expanded upon this belief in a way not reflected in other responses. When Participant 8 was asked to clarify their opinion on how Catholicism should view the LGBTQ+ community, they said:

> I don't think that someone can identify as Catholic and then also say they are homophobic. To truly love thy neighbor as God asks, it's not something that can coexist with homophobia. It's a manipulation of the faith to make a certain group of people be excluded when the main tenant of the faith is to love everyone.

While this belief may not have been expressly stated by other participants, the idea of the "true Christian" came up in a few interviews as a word to distinguish between those that participants deemed hypocritical (those who claimed homophobia and Christianity could coexist) and those they deemed as more closely adhering to the Bible. While each participant had their own conceptualization of what this "true Christian" looked like, all agreed that hatred and judgment were not values they found compatible with the ideals of their faith, regardless of denomination.

"That's Between Them and God"

Many participants of all three Abrahamic faith backgrounds described their stance of non-judgment as connected to the idea that it was not their place to judge someone. To many participants, humans are fallible in the eyes of their religion and thus cannot be good judges when it comes to the

morality of others. Instead, God is the final judge of actions because only God is righteous enough to judge someone's actions as good or bad.

Many participants considered this idea central to their religion. When one participant was asked about the guiding principles of their faith, they stated:

> First and foremost is respect. There is a lot that people think comes with Islam, but if you truly read the scriptures and ignore the more cultural side of things and look at the religion itself, it's all about respect. Respect for yourself, respect of your connection to God, and most of all your respect for other people. Despite the differences and similarities you might have with other religions, you as a person have no place shaming another person for what they believe in. That's between them and God.

Respect to this participant meant that one was not allowed to judge, ridicule, or punish others for behaviors simply because they were deemed "sinful." Instead, that judgment should be left to God since only God is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. The participant stated that their religion called them to interact with others in a respectful manner and not try to take God's role in the natural order of the world. Trying to replace God was a theme that arose in the interview with another participant, who remarked on the grave sin of trying to become God, saying:

> Like, arrogance is something that is very looked down upon, and there is this belief where it is like, you cannot judge another person for the actions that they take, because essentially the only person that can judge them is God. And you are not God. And that's a major sin to consider yourself God.

An act of judgment to this participant meant trying to usurp the natural flow of cosmic authority, and was thus a grave sin in the eyes of their religion. This sentiment was not unique, with many participants of all three Abrahamic faiths echoing a similar belief that judging others was an egregious sin and thus should be avoided in an effort to live a life that was according to the principles of their religion.

Do Unto Others As You Would Have Done to You

To several participants, the golden rule of nonjudgment was simple: treat others how you wish to be treated. It often touched on the topic of respect, as many of these subthemes have, but the idea also reflected a will to do right by others. These participants whose interviews contained threads of this subtheme were insistent that their religion guided them to respect of others as a foundational principle, and to act in another way would be to act against God. One participant explained how they would want to be viewed without prior judgment and how they attempted to reflect that in their interactions with others:

> The idea of respecting different identities whether you accept it or not is fundamental. Like for me believing in my religion, I'm not going to expect people to understand why I think what I

believe but it's also not an invitation to assume things about me. You believe in what you want to believe in, you do what you want to do, and I'm not going to call you out on that.

For this participant, who identified as Muslim, nonjudgment meant not assuming others' behaviors to be good or bad based on a limited perspective. This participant reflected on how difficult it was existing as a Muslim person in the United States, especially after the rampant rise of Islamophobia in the last 25 years, and how they never wished to inflict that kind of pain on someone else. To them, nonjudgment was an act of hope. Nonjudgment was an act of resisting stereotypes and assumptions to be kind to others, a sentiment reflected directly in another Muslim participant's interview:

> To push my ideals and my beliefs onto someone else who doesn't believe in them, I think that's bigotry. And we have been fighting people doing that to us for decades, and to be a part of a religion that promotes community, that promotes acceptance, that promotes peace, and then go directly against that I think is counterintuitive. Like, if you want to show people how beautiful this religion is, then it has to come from you.

To both of these participants, nonjudgment represents a wish they have about how they wish to be treated, and both indicated that they believed their religion called on them to believe such.

Challenges of Explaining One's Views: Intra- and Inter-faith Dialogues on the LGBTQ+

A final prominent theme from the interviews is the idea that having inter-faith (between people of different religions or beliefs) and intra-faith (between people of the same/similar religion or belief) dialogues on LGBTQ+ issues are incredibly difficult. While this section does not cover every challenge and problem that participants mentioned in the course of their interviews, it will endeavor to explore the most common ideas on why faith-based conversations on LGBTQ+ issues are so difficult. Faith-based disagreements, assumptions about religion by LGBTQ+ communities, and the ambiguity of where faith-based homophobia arises all lead to a culture of confusion, anger, and fear when it comes to discussing LGBTQ+ issues through a religious lens.

The Difficulty of Faith-Based Disagreements on LGBTQ+ Issues

When asked about their experiences discussing LGBTQ+ issues in a religious context, no participants provided a positive example of a conversation they felt occurred with minimal resistance. While some were able to provide an example of a time where coming out went better than expected or where someone learned something and listened empathetically, these stories were rare. Instead, participants were usually only able to provide negative examples if they had any experience at all. Some participants stated that they had never had conversations on LGBTQ+ issues with members of their faith group, typically because of one of two reasons; it either was never discussed because LGBTQ+ people were actively treated as nonexistent by members of their faith community, or the participant did not bring it up intentionally so as to avoid an argument. "I don't want them to say something that I disagree with so fundamentally," one participant shared after explaining that they had never talked about

LGBTQ+ issues with other Muslims. Another highlighted the major cultural differences evident between their religion's culture in the United States versus abroad:

> It's not something that's commonly talked about, and I think that's because it's a Western society thing. Not necessarily that it's only prominent in Western society, but there's this idea that you can't be out or LGBTQ+ in countries like Qatar or Iraq, especially in the wake of the World Cup [in Qatar].

This participant stated that while they know LGBTQ+ issues are talked about in all countries, this stigma around acknowledging LGBTQ+ people remained prevalent in their religion's culture, even if secular media in countries like the United States encouraged discussion on the topic. They described researching LGBTQ+ issues in Islam before our discussion because they had never had exposure to that discussion before being prompted to do so. These topics were not discussed frequently enough for this participant to claim a religious stance, but they described how they had seen religion and culture intertwine in the treatment of *hijras*, an umbrella term that refers to a gender minority group in the Indian sub-continent that uses neither male nor female pronouns (Al-Mamun et. al 2022): "It's not necessarily that [hijras] are accepted, but there is an acknowledgment of them, whereas with same-sex relationships, there's little acknowledgment." Here, the participant provides a unique example of cultural and religious stigma overlapping and creating a system that incorporates queer identities into the social structure without offering these minority groups full social support.

When people in power do begin to make changes towards tolerance for LGBTQ+ identity, such as India's supreme court case in 2014 that legally recognized hijras as a third gender (Associated Press in New Delhi), there is often severe social pushback that makes discussions on these matters all the more difficult. Christian participants remarked on a similar struggle as Pope Francis made efforts towards including LGBTQ+ people into religion, offering blessings for same-sex unions and baptisms for transgender people (Horowitz et. al 2023). "Oftentimes, the Pope receive[d] backlash from conservative members of the church for asking in calls for kindness and inclusivity, and that does not make me proud to be Catholic," one participant remarked. This backlash has caused severe division both within and outside the Catholic church. One participant remarked on the frustration they felt in the wake of major backlash to inclusion and how it often left a bad impression on those who are not Catholics:

> I think that Catholics are seen more as a monolith by outside viewers. I mean, I know that every Catholic has different beliefs and interpretations, but the public views us as a monolith and it can make talking about these things more difficult.

While many participants recognized that debates over LGBTQ+ issues are rampant in religious communities, they worried that those outside of their religion would think of them as a cultural monolith, which is not entirely based in speculation. During the course of these interviews, several participants made comments that erred on the side of presumptuous; whether it was about a different denomination of the same religion, such as a comment made about Catholicism by a Protestant, or about

a different religion all together, several participants shared generalizations about those in religious communities, despite being a part of a religious community themselves. While some participants stated that these generalizations were based primarily in personal experience, these generalizations could lean periodically into the stereotypical. Such stereotyping practices, while potentially based in some form of truth, ultimately leads to more animosity on the subject of religion and LGBTQ+ issues, making the subject harder to discuss.

Where to Focus the Discussion: Is Perception of LGBTQ+ Issues Within Faith Communities Based in Text or Culture?

"There's a very fine line between culture and religion in every society, I think," Participant 11 stated after talking about stereotypes of the Muslim community. The question of whether homophobia in religious spaces is based on a religious text or on culture was asked in every interview, and this quote highlights the dynamic between religion and culture that defines the modern debate over LGBTQ+ issues. Is homophobia in religious communities strictly text-based? Is it exclusively a cultural problem? As Participant 11 highlights, the line between religion and culture is often quite blurred, yet there do seem to be some common understandings as to the difference between strictly religious rules and cultural norms. Participants were often quick to highlight textual evidence for restrictions on LGBTQ+ behavior, citing the story of Adam and Eve or the verses in the Book of Leviticus as the driving force for more restrictive interpretations of their religions, but they were also rarely willing to say that anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric was entirely text or religion-based. "I think it ties back to the Torah, but [the view of LGBTQ issues] changes as the times and culture change," said one participant. As time moves forward, cultural forces push religions to adapt their rules, which in turn changes the culture, which creates a situation in which culture and religion are inseparable; the religion is a part of the broader culture of a people, and the broader culture is a fundamental part of the religion.

This push and pull between religion and culture can lead to both accepting and restrictive outcomes. One participant highlighted that the sin of homosexuality was actually not that high in the list of priority sins, and it was only elevated into a what the participant called a "Thou Shalt Not" sin after anti-LGBTQ cultural pressures focused on it. When discussing Christianity's focus on LGBTQ+ issues in recent years, one participant remarked that they thought "that people use the Bible as an excuse to condemn homosexuality." In this participant's opinion, people, or the culture that surrounds a given religious institution, take lines out of context in order to minoritize and ostracize an entire community. Another participant was discussing a similar trend in Muslim religious communities, remarking:

> There are texts that have been interpreted in certain ways by different scholars that give one indication or another, but at the end of the day, the discrimination that's there? That's a social issue. The religion does not teach discrimination. It can say what it considers right or what it considers wrong. It considers smoking wrong. It considers drinking wrong. But that's also an interpretation of the fact that those are harmful for your health. So when it comes to that, the choice to discriminate against someone based on their identity is very culturally based, very

individually based. And to associate that with the religion is harmful towards that religion and the relationship that society has with that religion.

This participant mentions at the end of their quote an example of the cyclical nature of religion and culture. The elders and text of the religion dictates what it believes is right or wrong, which encourages the broader culture to adopt a prejudice against what is wrong, yet if those religious leaders decide that something liked by the public is wrong (like drinking in this example), this can deeply affect how the people of that religion come to view that religious institution: not as something with moral authority so much as an out-of-touch institution at best or an actively harmful group at worst.

One Protestant respondent explained that they conceptualized the church as different from religion itself, with the church being the culture or community within congregations and denominations, while the religion was "exactly what was in the Bible and no more." They went on to explain that they saw this distinction most clearly in the Catholic church. While the participant themself was not Catholic, they conceived of the church of Catholicism to be centered on the religious authority of the Pope, despite the participant's firm belief that "the Pope is not God and should not be thought of as God." While this participant understood the Pope from an outsider perspective to be an absolute moral authority for Catholics, Catholic respondents themselves often declared a belief that the Pope was akin more to a moral guide stone as opposed to an absolute authority on matters of religion. While the Pope was certainly a large part of these Catholic participants' understandings of who set the rules for the religion, the Pope was a guide for congregations and churches on how to act rather than an absolute autocrat on the meanings of holy scripture.

These divides in culture and religious understandings often have to do with regional differences, some participants argue. Religious opinions can depend on what country or even state one finds themselves in. One participant explained that in their denomination of Christianity, there was a large divide in how churches in the north of the United States viewed LGBTQ+ issues versus those in the South, though they admitted that LGBTQ+ acceptance was largely dependent on the priest's deposition. Another student who identified as Muslim explained that certain countries under Islamic or Sharia law refused to acknowledge LGBTQ+ issues out of a lack of willingness to discuss the issue, but, according to them:

It's important to know that the holy book does fully acknowledge LGBTQ+ people, but I think that it's culture that makes leaders of the country not even acknowledge LGBTQ+ people.

This student also highlighted that certain religious communities kept this culture of minimal acknowledgement, despite being located in a country where LGBTQ+ issues were more openly discussed, due to histories of shame, punishment, and fear surrounding the issue.

While participants often differed on their exact breakdown of the interplay between culture and religious text, most agreed that there was significant overlap between the rules of a religion and the culture of its followers. This blurred distinction can make these conversations of faith and LGBTQ+ issues all the more difficult, leading to less public will for discourse on these topics.

A Barrier of Faith: Talking to LGBTQ+ People as a Religious Person

This topic of interaction with LGBTQ+ people was not a part of the original scope of this study, but many participants brought up their experiences interacting with queer people, and the answers participants gave began to shape an idea on how religion is perceived by the LGBTQ+ community. This addition to the questions produced a litany of differing responses, but many were similar in tone and focus.

Empathy in the Face of Stigma

Often, participants noted a stigma around religion as something that is inherently anti-LGBTQ, while also expressing compassion and empathy for those in the queer community who had been harmed by religious systems. When asked if LGBTQ+ people come with assumptions about their religious identity, Participant 6 said "I think most members of the queer community try to stay away from religion just because of the stigma that is around it, and I don't fault them for it," adding that they hoped that queer people would "have the same level of openness that I have towards them." Another participant of Catholic faith added "I'm lucky not to have that kind of trauma, but I recognize that the church has caused a lot of harm." Similar sentiments of both stigma around religion from queer communities and empathy towards queer people with religious trauma echoed in interviews across all three Abrahamic religions and all political parties.

When Participant 2 reflected on interactions with LGBTQ+ people, they emphasized the importance of empathy for those with religious trauma or those who are in a crisis of faith, arguing

> To love somebody is such a beautiful thing, and me personally, I can never tell somebody to not love someone. That seems like the most heartbreaking thing in the world, and I think a lot of people could stand to acknowledge how heartbreaking that is.

Participant 2 then went on to explain that while Islam "is not the most comforting of religions for LGBTQ+ people," there is always a way to interact with LGBTQ+ people in an empathetic and caring way, a belief that Participant 2 believed could be more universal in the Muslim community. This empathy, to many participants, is even more vital when LGBTQ+ people act in ways antagonistic towards religious beliefs. Participant 8 explained this concept in detail, saying:

> I don't love when people act in ways that they know are specifically contrary to Catholic beliefs just for spite, but I don't take it too personally because the Catholic Church has caused them harm. I don't feel the need to say I'm being persecuted, because the Church hasn't been great to them.

When asked about what they meant by acting in ways contrary to Catholic belief, Participant 8 told a story about an ex-Catholic friend of theirs who ate meat on the Fridays of Lent specifically because Christian practice had told them they were prohibited from it. This act of brazen defiance did not cause

Participant 8 to feel any anger, they recounted, because "the Church has caused them a lot of harm." Religious people, across all faiths, incorporate empathetic practices into their interactions with LGBTQ+ people in order to subvert some of the stereotypes that many queer people have of religion.

When asked about the stereotypes around religion they have experienced,Participant 8 went on to explain that for them, modesty was a personal journey with God, but that people, both LGBTQ+ and not, associated it with "a hard stick religion that forces women into certain clothes or conservative politics," neither of which Participant 8 believes describes their religion or politics. Participants expressed their concern around harsh stereotypes like this being pushed both by individuals and larger media apparatuses, with some finding it ultimately more damaging to the people to whom religion has caused harm. Participants expressed concern that if religion remains associated with harsh rules and limited acceptance, both religious and queer communities end up losing valuable members by forcing them to choose one identity over another.

Two participants took this concept a step further; both come from minoritized religious identities and expressed how solidarity between minoritized religions and queer communities can be vital for the advancement of human rights, with one participant stating that the bond is over a shared "minoritized identity where you treat people how you want to be treated. You realize how unfairly you are [both] treated as a minoritized person." This perceived bond can quickly be betrayed, however, as Participant 6 explains:

> It hurts a lot when people aren't willing to stand up against oppression of a certain group, simply because they think they have laws or prejudice against queer people. There are Muslims that are gay, there are Muslims that are bi, there are Muslims that are trans, and then to minimize their identities and say that oppression and genocide are okay for an entire group of people? Because their government doesn't support something?

The bond that is believed to be there can quickly be shattered by the stereotype of a hateful religious person, which participants say only fuels the cycle of perceived hatred between religious communities and queer communities. While many participants found the stereotypes a sort of obstacle to overcome or a simple fact of the oppressive nature of religious trauma, this stereotype of religious animosity can quickly lead to dire effects for those in either or both communities and the continuing of traumatic relationships between faith and sexuality.

With so much on the line in communicating with LGBTQ+ people as religious people, participants cited a belief that churches, mosques, and synagogues needed to be doing more to combat the rampant stereotype of anti-LGBTQ religion. One participant, a Jewish trans person, advocated for this kind of active role for religious communities by saying "since religious communities appear to be inherently anti-LGBTQ+, our religious communities need to do more work to show that they're not." The work falls, according to most participants, on the shoulders of religious communities to undo the centuries of religious trauma built in queer communities. While communication across this trauma rift may not be easy and may require a radical amount of empathy, most participants agree that it is the

preferred strategy for combatting histories of oppression. Atonement and reparations, they argue, are the only ways that the rift between religion and LGBTQ+ identity can begin to close.

Conclusion

Religion, gender, and sexuality are all major factors within modern political, cultural, and social discourse. In the advent of a new age, research must continue to study the opinions, thoughts, and beliefs of the youngest members of society in hopes of creating a tomorrow built on acceptance. While these interviews do not represent the entirety of this generation's religious and political beliefs, there were multiple compelling themes that emerged: non-judgment, a feeling of lacking authority to talk about religion, the value of community, and the difficulty of faith-based conversations about LGBTQ+ issues. While each individual had their own perspective on their religion and how LGBTQ+ issues fit into their belief system, many expressed a similar hope for the future and the belief in acceptance for those who are often marginalized in religious spaces.

Appendix A: Interview Script

The text below outlines the script utilized for the interviews of religious college students. I have not included the beginning disclosures in an effort to keep this appendix concise, but participants were asked for consent to both audio recording and the use of their answers in this discussion.

　　　We're going to start with some background information. You are a student at the University of Pittsburgh, correct?
　　　Do you or people you associate with openly identify as LGBTQ+?
　　　Do you identify with a political party/affiliation/ideology? If so, which one?
　　　Do you identify as religious?
　　　What religion?
　　　What sect/denomination of that religion [if applicable]?
　　　What do you think are the key practices/rituals in your religious/spiritual life? Are there holidays, prayers, or other practices in your faith that you find important or central to your experience?
　　　Are there particular stories or sections of religious texts that are central to your faith or that you particularly enjoy?*
　　　What do you feel are the guiding principles/basic elements of your faith?
　　　Do you feel you connect with these principles? Are there certain tenets of your faith that you feel strongly connected with or tied to?
　　　Does your faith/religion encourage a certain view on homosexuality/trans people/LGBTQ+ issues as a whole? If so, what? (encourage them to expand upon that.)
　　　Is there a religious text that seems to encourage this?
　　　Is this view more of a cultural/social phenomenon within congregations?
　　　Is there a difference between how members of your religion view various parts of the LGBTQ+ community? For example, is there a difference between how trans people and people in same-sex relationships are viewed?*
　　　Do you feel that your religion's teachings and beliefs on homosexuality/LGBTQ+ issues/communities differ from your own? Why or why not?
　　　If so, do you think there are like-minded people within your faith tradition? Do you see a possibility for a shift in understanding?
　　　In either case, and if they have not explained this already, ask them to articulate their position on LGBTQ+ people.
　　　Have you had any experiences in which you had to rationalize your position on LGBTQ+ people to members of your religion? If so, describe.
　　　Have you had any experiences in which you had to rationalize your position on LGBTQ+ people to people outside of your religion? If so, describe.

If the participant identifies as LGBTQ+ or is friends/affiliated with people who are LGBTQ+, ask them about hostility from LGBTQ+ people regarding religious identity. Have you had experiences where LGBTQ+ people come with assumptions about religious identities?*

Is there anything else on this topic that you can think of that I didn't cover in these questions or that we didn't talk about yet that you wanted to share?

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